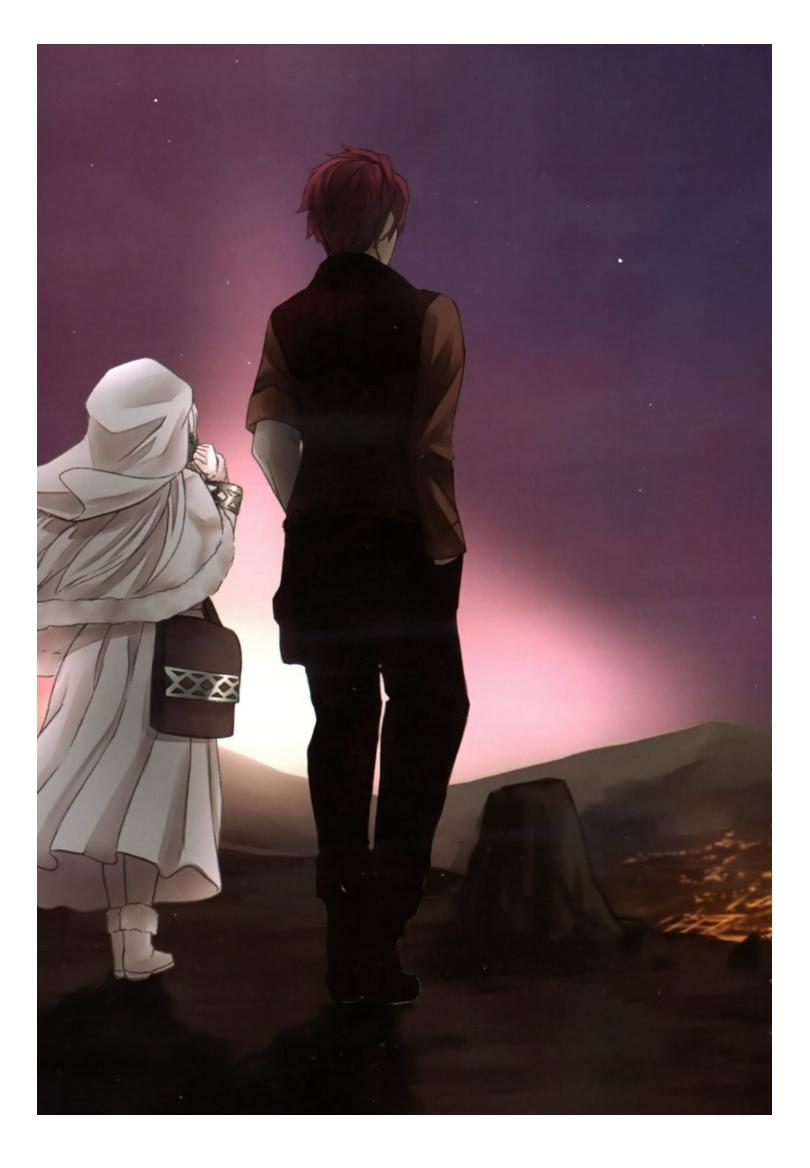




Illustrations





「へえ」

「わあ……」

クースラの小さな驚きと、フェネシスの感嘆の声。

「お前の好きな言葉だな」

え?!

「幸運は思ったよりもある」

眼下には、あちこちに篝火が焚かれたお祭り騒ぎの

町の様子が広がっていた。

町の中心部の広場から、四方八方に伸びる細い道に

様はまるで、そういう形の製錬炉で、広場で溶かされた

至るまで、人の顔が見えそうなほどに明るかった。その

鉄が道に沿って流れ出ているかのようだ。

「俺たちは、この町で工房を構えられるんだ。山ほどの

発見があるだろうな」











WORLD

二十年以上続く正教徒と異教徒の戦いは、教会の長である教皇が、聖典の書かれた約束の地クルダロスを異教徒から取り戻すことを目的に始めた。だが、異教徒から神の大地を取り戻すという大義名分があれば、どこに攻め入っても

正当化されたため、戦火は広がり、騎士 団のような国家とも呼べない不可思議 な集団が勢力を伸ばしてきた。元は教 会の下にあったはずの騎士団は今や 大きな権力を手に入れ、世界における 権力図は複雑な様相を呈している。





利権を巡り



この世界で最も大きな権威。元は 騎士団の上位組織であったが、 騎士団の成長と共に現在は利権 を巡って対立関係にある。





神の名の下、異教徒から土地を 取り返すことを名目に聖戦を繰り 返し成長した金と軍事力の塊。現 在は教皇をしのぐ力を持つ。







正教徒たちと約束の地を巡って戦争をしている。ラトリア国は、最後の「異教徒が収める国」であったが、このほど改宗宣言を行った。そのため騎士団は、異教徒最大の鉱山町であったカザンに入植する大義名分を失うことになる。

Prologue

"Gentlemen, you have no home to return to."

The deep voice resonated through the bonfire clearing packed with knights and civilians, mercenaries, merchants seeking to reap the profits of war, and craftsmen who had left their homelands for a new land.

All were extremely on edge, but not one of them said a word. In this tense, suffocating atmosphere, they were holding their breath for what he would say next.

"Gentlemen, you have no home to return to. Therefore, we can only continue on. But there is nothing to fear. We, the Claudius Knights, have always been guided by the light, for we are the agents of Heaven! Gentlemen, you are not incompetent subjects aimlessly receiving a stipend. With the power of God and our faith, we will cut through the darkness of this world. Gentlemen, advance and reach out in front of you, and your new home will be within your grasp!"

When Archduke Kratal finished, the crowd did not cheer for him, but gulped in apprehension. Most of the people there had left their homes, risking everything on this uncertain journey.

They had no choice but to continue forward. To find a peaceful land, they had to continue onward. They told themselves that with nowhere to return to, any obstacles in their path would be nothing they couldn't overcome.

The country of Latria was known as the last of the pagan lands, and her queen had just converted to the Church's Orthodoxy just days ago. With her conversion, Latria was, in theory, no longer a pagan country. For the Order of Claudius, which had expanded its influence as a result of the war with the pagans, this meant they had no more enemies. For those people who had planned to live in Latria, there were no new lands to conquer. It was precisely because there had been pagan cities, that the Church had taken advantage of them to plunder and settle under the banner of a just cause.

Be that as it may, they couldn't stop.

Just as the water in a river flows onward, never returning to the same place twice,

They told themselves they had no choice but to continue on,

And that there was definitely a light ahead.

Act 1

The scene looked like soup with beef chuck floating around.

The gently-sloping fields covered in snow stretched as far as the eye could see, bare but for the occasional rock.

Inside a simple, isolated hut in the middle of that drab scenery.

The alchemist Kusla had no interest in the conversation and was absentmindedly gazing out through the cracks in the decaying wooden window.

"I simply cannot express my joy at being able to meet the beloved Claudius Knights!"

The overblown speech resounded through the crude hut that would likely blow over in a strong wind.

Kneeling on the floor was a nobleman wearing a fur cloak, his proof of nobility. Although he was obviously dressed to the nines, his attire did not even compare to the tailoring in the southern lands. In short, he was just a country noble, with his two attendants hanging their heads while shrinking into their crude leather armor.

"Right. I've heard about your ability to govern your territories. Our master Archduke Kratal has said that his only wish is to see a long association."

"You have my gratitude."

Kusla stifled a yawn at this typical exchange between influential people.

It had been five days since they had left the town where Archduke Kratal had inspired the people and they had stopped in at one of the border toll offices along the main highway. The ancient kings had traveled around with the royal court, collecting taxes and holding court, and perhaps as a remnant of those customs, the local lords would offer up a tribute whenever someone of high rank crossed the border.

It was quite a hassle, but confirming who was in charge of the area was probably very important to those with low standing. In addition, Kusla's group

had now arrived at a place that would normally be considered enemy territory, since it was governed by pagans. Actually, they should probably be called former pagans, but that was a delicate topic.

The particularly high-handed conduct of the seated knight appeared to be an attempt to cover up that issue.

"As for that matter, here is something to amuse you on your travels."

The kneeling noble motioned his attendant to hold out a sturdy box.

Though not very large, it produced a nice, satisfying sound.

"Hey."

The man sitting in the sole, crude chair in the hut motioned with his hand. He was Alzen, the man who was officially Kusla's employer.

While everyone's gaze was fixed on the box, Kusla huffed with exasperation and moved away from the window, "... Excuse me".

Without hesitation, he reached out and opened the lid. The soldiers in the hut did not cry out, probably because it was a common sight for them.

Packed inside were gold grains.

"Hmph,"

Kusla snorted and took out one of the tools of his trade from the pouch on his waist. He was an alchemist, and dealt with minerals and metals in his line of work. He grabbed one of the gold grains and casually rubbed it against the flat, rough, black gem he had taken out.

"...This is above average, see?" He pointed out the gold streak left behind on the black gem, and Alzen nodded, getting up from his seat.

"I pray for the continued development of your territory."

"Thank you for your kindness."

Then Alzen sent the local lord on his way like he was the king.

The Great War against the heretics had continued for twenty years.

It had begun due to religious zeal, but was now becoming a mere pretext for

seizing land. The group that had shown the most growth during the war was the Knights of Claudius.

The legitimacy of their military might was different from that of the Church, which was organized with the Pope at the top. As the agents of God, it was secured by their annihilation of the pagans. The Knights did not show much interest in proselytizing, yet there were branches in towns throughout the world, just like the Church, and they kept in close communication with each other. The circulation of people and goods via this network also resembled that of a large company with extensive branch offices.

The Knights of Claudius was akin to a merger of the Church and a large company, bolstered by a powerful military force. Within the Knights' economic control were also mines and smelters, and a huge quantity of metals in circulation. The reason that alchemists like Kusla were hired was that improved metallurgical techniques led to a huge boost in profits.

"Hmm. They did not follow in the wake of that stupid noble the other day?"

After sending off the country noble, Alzen picked up one of the gold flakes and noted wearily, "It was certainly a brilliant plan to mix gold with copper to increase the quantity and then saying it was valuable colored gold, huh?"

It was the fourth time Kusla had been summoned to assist Alzen. It was not unusual for those respectfully presenting tributes to double-cross their superiors, so the ability to assess the authenticity and quality of precious stones and metals immediately was an indispensable skill.

"It's a country of uncultured barbarianism. It's necessary to deal with them the same way you do with a dog."

"Even more so when that dog insists on calling itself a cat, huh?"

Alzen put the gold back and had his subordinate take care of the box.

"It's ridiculous,"

He said brusquely.

This land belongs to the country of Latria, the last country in the world ruled by a pagan queen. Thus the Orthodoxy Church's army corps, notably the Knights of Claudius, had invaded and seized many towns. Of all the towns captured, their greatest prize was probably Kazan, Latria's largest mining city, which had fallen just the other day.

At that point, if they could hold this town, Latria would be ruined.

Then Latria's queen suddenly went and declared her conversion to the Church.

The Claudius Knights was a religious organization rounding up stray dogs, so to speak, if their prey suddenly turned into a cat, there would not be anything at which to aim their spears anymore. This was all the more a problem for those already aiming to behead.

"Still, they seem subservient in their own way. I think there was quite an amount in just that box, huh?"

Kusla said in a servile manner, but he was also probing to find out what Alzen thought about the current situation.

The motionless Alzen, seemingly engrossed in his thoughts, suddenly looked at the black gem.

"That's a handy tool that lets you know the substance of something just by scraping it, huh? How reliable is it?"

"In the hands of a discerning goldsmith, it can measure purity to a one or two hundredths per centum of accuracy."

"I've heard the word touchstone used as a metaphor, but it's my first time actually seeing one."

"Does it intrigue you?"

Without getting angry, Alzen shifted his gaze to Kusla at his somewhat jestful question, "If you could infer the quality of anything just by rubbing it, nothing could be better. If you could choose your destination just by rubbing the stone marker at a crossroad, how wonderful would that be?"

Coming from Alzen, who had many subordinates and was in charge of negotiating with the rulers awaiting them at their destination, this did not really sound like a joke.

Within the Knights of Claudius, there was a unit whose insignia was the Azami's Crest.

Alzen was the herald of this squad, responsible for delivering proclamations and eliminate all obstacles. In other words, his role was to pave the way for the rulers.

The unit, for which Alzen was in charge of leading, was to reclaim towns that were conquered by the Knights; their specialty was colonization.

Now too, the unit was right in the middle of heading with new settlers toward Latria's largest mining town Kazan, which had fallen to the Knights.

But Kazan, which had been a pagan land and thus captured with impunity, converted to Orthodoxy after the ruler of this city, the queen, had converted. That being the case, the Knights would appear to be attacking one of the Church's own towns. If the settlers continued on, it was likely the situation would be a little tricky.

It was probable to go from being the hunter to the hunted if they were regarded as heretics who had bared their fangs against the Church's followers. Even if matters worsened however, they could not simply abandon their march.

For one thing, there was the matter of the Knights' prestige. For another, many of those who left home to migrate had nowhere to return to. They left their faith and fate in the hands of the Knights and their destiny, and had come this far. If the thousands of migrants learned that there was no new world, who knew what they might end up doing?

Surely the Knights, whose ranks had swelled with each of the many battles it went through, would know well that humans with nothing left to lose are no different from beasts.

It was in this difficult situation that Alzen showed interest in how easy it was to use a touchstone.

No matter how experienced a person was, surely they would feel uneasy about the future. Of course, there was the likelihood of Alzen being simply curious.

"As one who relies on Your Excellency's keen insight, I do not really wish to

hear such sentiments."

While Kusla did not mince his words, naturally, Alzen noticed the implication.

Not getting angry at such remarks was also typical of a skilled negotiator.

"I simply mean using anything that might be of use. Hey."

Alzen called out to a young officer waiting in the corner of the room, who quickly held out a sheet of parchment.

"This is what you wanted. Do not lose it before we enter the town."

Receiving the parchment with some surprise, Kusla looked up at Alzen with feigned servility, "That being said, there's no reason to not compensate you, right?"

What Kusla received was a letter of privilege from the head of the unit bearing the Azami crest, Archduke Kratal, which guaranteed Kusla's freedom in the new town. With this letter, he would even, for example, be allowed to light a bonfire in a church.

For refusing to kowtow to this letter of privilege would be tantamount to defying the Claudius Knights.

This letter changed everything.

In Kazan, there would surely be much knowledge and many techniques left behind by the pagans, things that were probably difficult for Orthodox members to accept. No matter how valuable that knowledge might be, rulers and pious heretical inquisitors who worried about appearances might scrutinize it, and then seal it in a stone warehouse or burn it.

But alchemists like Kusla were concerned neither about paganism nor the Church. All that mattered to them was whether something would benefit their research; anything else was of no concern. If possible, Kusla wanted to be the first one in Kazan to see for himself and memorize, or procure a copy of, this dangerous knowledge and techniques before they were sealed away. To accomplish that, he would have to ignore irksome procedures and get access to various places.

It was for this reason that Kusla meekly acted as a minion towards Alzen.

"Naturally. In exchange for guaranteeing your freedom of movement in Kazan, you must share with me the entirety of the knowledge you obtain."

"Perhaps there is a greater alchemist who might be more suitable for you, my lord?"

The Azami's Crest unit already had its own proper alchemist with the title of "Doctor."

By all rights, Kusla should not have been able to go to Kazan, but he'd maneuvered his way into things.

"Nonsense. There's a way to use a treasured sword like a treasured sword, and a way to use a sword for killing like a sword for killing."

Kusla was initially convinced that the fact that he and the others had been called on for trivial matters like examining the tributes, but that was not the case. In any organization, there are those who plot to rise through the ranks for the sake of political power. Alchemists were no exception.

Although if someone actually made it up to the upper echelon of the Knights just by currying favor with various people, that too could probably be regarded as a kind of alchemy.

"But even setting that aside, I'm still concerned,"

Kusla said, putting the parchment in his breast pocket. This situation had him reading between the lines.

"Are you saying that we cannot stay in Kazan for very long?"

The Knights was easily granting freedom of movement to someone like Kusla. That hinted at a sense of urgency on the part of the rulers.

At any rate, if the conversion of Latria's queen was to become accepted by the world, then forcibly settling in the towns under her jurisdiction might be perceived as a challenge to the Church's authority. If that happened, the settlers would quite likely be driven out of Kazan right after arriving, and if they left empty-handed without even laying eyes on the knowledge and techniques left there, the losses would be devastating.

Even if they could not take any gems or precious metals, it would be a

different story if they did obtain the knowledge that was even more valuable.

Alzen's position as commander of the Forces meant that there were glimpses of strategic moves with possible bad outcomes into consideration.

Kusla stared fixedly at Alzen.

Now, amongst the Forces, rumors were flying about those "bad possibilities".

"We must constantly be as prepared as we can be. That's all."

Alzen evaded the question.

Kusla did not pursue it further.

"Very good."

Kusla respectfully bowed his head and left the border toll office.

Kusla went outside and returned with relief to the wagon he and his companions shared.

Alzen's behavior was the only way he could infer the current predicament and their destination, Kazan. Even though Kusla did not, of course, expect to hear a clear outlook on the situation from Alzen's own mouth, he had received sufficient clues. And whatever Alzen's intentions, simply having gotten hold of the letter of privilege allowing free movement about Kazan was a success. Because there were a few days left until they reached the town, Kusla decided to spend the remaining time drinking and sleeping.

However, he suddenly noticed a white figure rustling at the edge of the fire.

He thought she was preparing lunch, but a bunch of merchants were a little ways away, aiming to profit and cooking meals as they gathered around a cauldron. The food from the merchants were tastier and cheaper, so Kusla's group had been doing that for the entire march. While they had wagons stocked with food that would not go bad even during long periods of rain, that benefit meant compromising on taste.

Therefore, it was impossible to think that she was cooking.

Kusla snuck up right behind the small, defenseless back.

```
"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Waaaahh!?"
```

Right after that small cry, a pot or something was knocked over. Along with the characteristic sound of water spilling on an open fire, ash swirled up into the sky.

```
"... Ah?"
```

Stunned, Kusla looked up at the swirling ash. When he looked back down, the person squatting in front of the fire and fiddling with something turned around timidly.

The pure white clothes were a nun's habit, and her skin was white as well. Even her hair was pure white, so her large green eyes stood out all the more. The girl, whose appearance still fit this description of a young, or even childish one, was Fenesis.

```
"If you play with fire, you'll wet the bed."
```

"I will not!"

"Won't play with fire or won't wet the bed?"

Without really paying much attention, Kusla, looked at Fenesis' hands suspiciously.

```
"Lead?"
```

With that small pause, Fenesis finally managed to regain a little bit of her usual composure.

"I heard...that you people...are up to something suspicious."

""

Kusla stared back silently at Fenesis, who flinched like a pup being reprimanded

Sighing, Kusla asked,

"Is that what Irine said?"

Irine, who was traveling with them, was two, three years older than Fenesis,

and the daughter of a blacksmith.

At Kusla's question, Fenesis awkwardly averted her eyes. She probably thought that if she admitted that it was Irine, she might be tattling, but telling a lie was against God's teachings.

Watching this not-unattractive girl's internal debate had its own pleasures for Kusla, but she seemed to reach a decision more quickly than he expected.

Looking at Kusla, she said,

"Be-because there is a suspicion of heresy, I have to investigate."

"Huh!?"

Kusla unintentionally let out a little laugh at Fenesis' excessive rhetoric.

At that laugh, Fenesis herself probably realized this was an implausible excuse, and her face immediately reddened.

When they first met, she really had thought Kusla and Weyland were sorcerers, and she would get worked up trying to find evidence of heresy. But having learned the reality about alchemists, she did not have such thoughts. In fact, Fenesis wanted to become a skilled alchemist who is able to play an active role as Kusla's partner.

So surely she was trying to hide something with that absurd excuse.

Kusla looked at Fenesis disappointedly.

"And speaking of which, where is Irine?"

He asked this unrelated question, and Fenesis looked at him like she had been tricked.

But when she met his gaze, she quickly averted her eyes and looked down.

"...Sh-she has gone to help make lunch...."

Kusla looked over to where they were preparing the meals, but there were too many people asking for food, and he could not see Irine's defining red hair. Certainly, she would cook to earn some pocket change if she was free, but it was impressive that a young lady like her dared to hang out amongst mercenaries who were no different from bandits.

"I think she'll probably make her way back here soon...."

"You mean a craftsman cannot bear to stay still?"

Most blacksmiths began working before dawn, and toiled before the forge until after midnight. Kusla knew full well that Irine was the sort of person who could not idle around.

But watching her for the past few days, he also felt that, even if she was as restless as usual, she appeared to be trying to forget something.

"Irine told you, didn't she? That this is fortune-telling."

"|"

Fenesis shrunk back in surprise. Her body did not quiver much, but unfortunately her head did.

She had the veil of her nun habit over her head, but by no means was it to show how pious she was.

Surely there was a reason why a young girl like Fenesis was with the alchemist Kusla and his group.

She was not a normal young girl, but rather, one whose bloodline was said to be cursed, for she had a characteristic of non-humans brought from faraway lands; under her veil were the pointed ears of a beast.

And these ears always revealed her thoughts, since she was careless even under normal circumstances.

"... I, I heard that you were fortune-telling with Mr Weyland. Fo-fortune-telling, is against God's teachings."

Kusla sighed.

"Do not speak of such revolting matters. There's no way I'd do something like that with him."

Weyland was an alchemist Kusla was acquainted with for a long time. The two of them had briefly set up a workshop in the port town of Gulbetty, and they would probably do the same in Kazan, the town they were heading to.

```
"B-but,"
```

Fenesis stopped in mid-sentence, and Kusla shrugged.

"Do we look like we believe in stuff like fortune-telling? We were gambling."

"... G-gambling?"

"We were just pouring melted lead into water and writing characters. Whoever did it better would be freed of a chore. And that Weyland wrote the characters ridiculously well. I do not know what kind of trick he pulled In the end, I took on four chores in a row. Now at the very least, I'm finally be released from them."

Those chores included being Alzen's servant, hear out the situation in Kazan, obtain a guarantee that he could act freely. Kusla did all that obediently, for despite being a victim of fraud, the fact was that he lost.

"By the way, where did that Weyland go?"

"... Oh, Mr Weyland ... he said he was going all the way to the back of the line"

"Huh?"

Kusla asked in return, and Fenesis ducked her head like she was being reprimanded.

"There is a merchant dealing in books...Mr Weyland said he was going to look at a book."

"I'm working, and he's off enjoying himself,"

Kusla had assumed that Weyland cheated, and was not bemused in the least.

He looked down at the lead boiling above the fire. The pot that Fenesis knocked over was apparently the one with water in it.

"So, what did you want to predict? Surely it was not something like whether or not there was heresy?"

When Kusla abruptly got to the point, Fenesis trembled miserably.

Even though it was done clumsily, she seemed to have thought that she had somehow or other successfully hidden her intentions.

"Definitely trying to predict the future, aren't you."

"Uh..."

Fenesis moaned and hung her head.

Perhaps she felt guilty about turning to fortune-telling even though she was wearing a nun's habit. Or perhaps she knew all too well that Kusla would not be happy about her trying to predict the future through fortune-telling.

But Kusla neither laughed at Fenesis nor got angry at her.

That was because his view of Fenesis had changed slightly. This "little girl" managed something really impressive a few days ago.

At that moment, Fenesis was no longer a toy that Kusla took bullied, abused, and teased, but a proper little alchemist who thought for herself, made a plan, and carried it out admirably to get the results she wanted.

So when Kusla realized that he had fallen right into her trap, not only was he so mortified that it seemed like his head would split, he was also partly happy that he'd acquired another accomplice.

Fenesis said she wanted to become Kusla's partner, as an alchemist.

As one of the cursed bloodline, her life was targeted all the time, and she lived scrutinizing people's expressions, so she probably yearned to be one of those rash people who had no regard for lives, including their own.

But her motive did not matter.

The question was whether she could move forward.

And Fenesis had the wits and the courage to advance. Even though she was small, she had pulled it off.

That was why he decided to not nitpick about her slight foolishness.

Given her amazing ability to scheme if necessary, he found that foolishness to be a little charming.

```
"Pour water into the pot."
```

[&]quot;... Huh?"

[&]quot;After all, it's just child's play."

Kusla said, and sat down next to Fenesis.

She was flustered, but he ignored it and kept talking,

"Lead melts well even in a fireplace. When you pour the melted lead into water, it changes into various forms. Here, pour the water in."

Kusla thrusted the now-empty pot at Fenesis.

She was an obedient girl whose body moved on its own after being told to by Kusla. She filled the pot, and the flames that had weakened from the spilled water regained strength. Kusla shook the pot a little, and checked on the melted lead.

He then lifted the pot with the lead in it and dripped it into the water drop by drop.

Fenesis, who had shrunk back until just a moment ago, immediately stared into the pot with all her concentration, not even noticing Kusla looking at her profile.

Such a simpleton, he thought. At the same time, looking at how interested she was in everything, he did not hate it.

Someone with skill but no curiosity could not become an alchemist.

```
"...Um"
```

Fenesis asked while staring at the lead in the water, and slowly turned to look at Kusla.

```
"Tha-that shape...what does it mean?"
```

Kusla gave a little shrug.

"I don't know. Fortune-telling is something village women do."

```
"…"
```

Fenesis looked a little disappointed. It seemed she yearned to know about the future.

Not surprisingly, Kusla reprimanded her.

"While I won't make fun of you for worrying about the future, it's foolish to

rely on something like fortune-telling,"

He said, and Fenesis hung her head.

Of course, though, he understood her worries.

It was likely that Irine restlessness and eagerness to help cook was born out of the same uneasiness, and Alzen dealing with the local lord in a particularly highhanded manner too was the same.

They were worried about whether this migration could succeed.

They were people without an objective when no directive was issued to them.

"Worrying is definitely not abnormal. But when you set me up, did you just simply believe in the outcome?"

After a little hesitation, Fenesis said,

"...No."

"Right?"

Kusla said without amusement.

The trap that Fenesis ensnared Kusla in was on the expectation that he was a good person. She tried to get Kusla to save Weyland, who was suffering the consequences of a stupid involvement with a noble lady in Gulbetty, and she probed him to overlook the secret mining of gold by nomadic tribes. Both outcomes would have been inconceivable for Kusla up until now.

Basically, Fenesis expected that he would do it because he was a good person. Kusla did not really want to acknowledge it, but he did have some idea as to why she had such an expectation.

For that reason, Fenesis had formed a hypothesis based on the facts she'd observed and carried it out skillfully. While daft with most things, she was surprisingly quick-witted at odd times.

"Now, the current situation is the same. Observe the facts and chew on it. Then construct your hypothesis. It is important to verify, and only then should you conclude, but even so predictions always entail uncertainty. Headstrong assumptions are scary. And the most terrifying part is misreading the results."

When Kusla said this, Fenesis looked at him with her clear, green eyes.

She was someone who listened carefully to what people said.

"The worst thing about baseless predictions such as fortune-telling is being completely unable to shake something off once you believe it. Because of that, people overlook important things and often interpret things to suit the results. When dealing with matters where the causes and outcome are uncertain, awaiting you is a labyrinth, and the malice of others."

Kusla had no desire to tease and laugh at Fenesis, nor did he think he was in an advantageous position to lecture her.

She was finally trying to stand on her own feet. He simply wanted to tell her not to make a stupid mistake.

"So do not go around thoughtlessly predicting the future using something like fortune-telling. On top of that, you're hoping for only good things, right? In this lousy world, no sane person would believe in fortune-telling."

"But, just a little...?"

Fenesis opened her mouth as if she were speaking without thinking, but kept quiet once Kusla glared at her.

After averting her gaze, and said with a rare sulkiness,

"...I think you're always too pessimistic."

She glanced fleetingly at him.

If he were a town craftsman with a stable life, it would probably be fine to pray for another good day for tomorrow. But unfortunately, Kusla was an alchemist, and in an alchemist's workshop, ill will always lingered. Nothing good would happen when one let down his guard.

He had emphasized that to Fenesis an umpteen number of times.

Besides, what Kusla wanted to say was just a bit different.

"I'm not pessimistic. In fact, I'm not particularly worried about the future."

"..."

Fenesis seemed a bit confused.

She knitted her brows into a pretty shape, thinking that Kusla was once again speaking befuddling her.

"But I have my own reasons. It's totally different from your reliance on fortune-telling."

"..."

Glancing sidelong at the dejected Fenesis, Kusla added charcoal onto the fire where the lead was melting.

The scent of delicious food wafted in from afar.

"Why do you think I've responded so obediently to Alzen's summons?"

"Huh?"

Kusla heaved a sigh at Fenesis asking that again.

"Are you aware of what kind of work I'm made to do?"

Miffed at this sarcastic tone, Fenesis quickly shot back a childish scowl, and replied, "V-verification at the customs office."

"That's right. And what I assess are the tributes presented by the local lords. By rights, however, it's where the lords collect taxes."

"...Eh?"

"The ones respectfully bowing and scraping are not the knights. Understand? The local lords are pay paying their respects to the Knights on their own lands. Even though we're already in Latria. What does that mean?"

"...Uh...mm."

Fenesis' gaze wandered in confusion. Kusla did not let the chance go by, and teasingly blew on her face.

Caught off guard, Fenesis closed her eyes, and after wiping her face, she glared angrily at Kusla.

It was childish teasing of a child.

"Those men who are resigned to lowering their heads to messengers have surely already heard about Latria's queen conversion. Yet even so, they think that it's prudent to kneel. The power of the Knights is still overwhelming, and they think it's better to bow down to the Knights. Accordingly, if you think about it normally, there's no way the Knights will accept the queen's conversion. The Knights will try to use its political power freely and obstruct this with all its might."

""

"With this basic understanding, I don't think there is a need to worry too much. Baselessly, irresponsibly, and thoughtlessly believing it's easy to know the future through fortune-telling, like what you did, is wrong from the outset."

With each word, Fenesis' head drooped further, and at the end, she curled up, on the verge of tears.

"I'm not pessimistic. I'm simply cautious. And rather than optimistic, you are just careless by dabbling in fortune-telling. That time in Gulbetty, and the golden sheep... well, it wasn't that bad, but this is way off now. Got it?"

Being admonished with logic, Fenesis naturally felt downhearted.

However, she felt so as she understood that he was right.

Kusla thought her intelligence and obedience were not bad traits to have.

So he thought, but Fenesis suddenly spoke without looking at him.

"Wh-what you said is right...I think."

"Not 'think.' Definitely."

At his correction, Fenesis discontentedly clammed up, curling her lips.

But she did not remain silent.

"B-but, but there are some things that cannot be verified...so, I I think..."

Kusla looked at Fenesis. Avoiding his gaze, she stared down at the fire.

He thought for a few moments, then asked,

"What did you want foretold?"

Upon hearing that, Fenesis turned a sulky look on him.

She was just a bit angry, like whenever she was being teased.

"I do not wish to say."

She suddenly turned away.

Without showing any expression, Kusla pinched her ear through her veil.

"Tell me!"

"|"

Fenesis screamed silently and twisted away.

He had not meant to grab hard, but it was a sensitive part.

Kusla let go, and she glared at him with tears in her eyes, holding her head.

"Tell me. What did you want to predict?"

There was still lead in the pot, and it was simmering on the fire, bubbling away.

Fenesis looked back and forth between the lead and what her hands were doing, her eyes wavering.



But Kusla remained motionless, so eventually she gave up.

She did not look at Kusla, perhaps as a token gesture of protest.

"Th-the future, and..."

She said, pursing her lips.

"Whether or not everyone can still be together...That's what I wanted to know."

Finally, she raised her eyes and looked at Kusla.

Taken aback, he could not immediately mask his expression. He was at a loss for words, for he failed to think of that.

But this was indeed very much like Fenesis. Innocent, completely without malice, she just quietly wished for a little happiness. And yet she did not say "With everyone". Because hers was a cursed existence, she said "Everyone," unconsciously assuming she would eventually be separated from them.

Kusla felt sheepish for one-sidedly presenting his coldhearted logic to this Fenesis.

"And besides."

Fenesis suddenly spoke, and Kusla faltered for a moment.

But he was clearly better than Fenesis at not revealing his feelings overtly.

"What?"

He said tersely.

Fenesis slowly looked away, and said,

"Furthermore, while I think that your methodology is correct, I cannot believe that's all there is."

"What?"

"Because you view the world...a little too harshly."

Fenesis' eyes were filled with a strange confidence, which Kusla thought was odd. Afterward, "A hypothesis based on the observation of reality...is that so?"

Kusla could not look away from her green eyes.

"This fortune-telling...no, gambling..."

Kusla stared at Fenesis seriously for a moment, and then the next moment scrutinized her eyes.

"What do you mean?"

Encouraged by Kusla's response, Fenesis straightened her usually hunched back, and said, "You suspected Mr Weyland of fraud, but I do not think you should have."

"Huuh?"

"The wager was about forming words in the lead, I think that is simple. If it was the fortune-telling that village women often do, would Mr Weyland not have been used to doing this often with those women?"

"Ah."

For something like flipping and guessing the side of the coin, people used to this could easily manipulate the throw and be spot on every time. He had assumed that could not be manipulated. But that was a miscalculation on his parr.

Groaning, Kusla suddenly noticed Fenesis' gaze.

"...What are you on about?"

Fenesis did not smile.

"Observe the facts and verify the hypothesis. But even when the facts are the same, I think different people view things differently. You suspected Mr Weyland was cheating, but I do not think he's that kind of person."

"Ugh!"

She had used his own reasoning against him. He felt beyond foolish.

"So in that case, seeing a positive future in the shape of the lead ... That is, I want you to ease up on me."

That was Fenesis' meager protest.

She was not obsessed with fortune-telling; it was just a small comfort.

Kusla understood why he had felt embarrassed. It was because he himself had been unable to understand games simply as games because of his rejection of fortune-telling.

Fenesis did indeed innocently wish to continue her relationships with Kusla and the others.

But by no means did her innocence ignore the truth of reality.

"But if he really did cheat...I probably would not have noticed because of my ignorance. Therefore, if I follow that logic, knowledge and experience and a discerning eye, are necessary. But..."

Fenesis said apprehensively.

"Perhaps...you can lighten up a little? Of course, I too understand that this is a secret to survival. But even so...you always seem pained,"

She herself said painfully.

Kusla did not know what to do. Alchemists were always regarded as a threat, viewed with suspicious eyes, and treated as a tool by their employers. To get by in such a world, they became indifferent to people's feelings, thinking only about their own profit, and excelled in understanding trickery. In that situation, Kusla assumed he had never had such straightforward feelings directed at him.

Then he muttered "No" to himself.

There was once.

That was when he first had feelings for Fenesis. For Kusla, who could only behave like himself, true to his name meaning "Interest," that was when he realized he could really like someone.

But, Kusla thought. He could not help but feel that following her suggestion would mean he would lose out to something. He felt he would degrade into something no better than dogs or wolves.

Kusla stared back at Fenesis bitterly, but she looked at him as if she cared for him from the bottom of her heart. There was a transparent pureness in her eyes.

In the end, Kusla could not deal with being on the receiving end of

forgiveness, and he pinched Fenesis' small nose.

"[?"

He said brusquely to the surprised Fenesis.

"Some big talk from you."

And he wiggled her nose all around, letting go after she got upset.

He had no sense of superiority.

Feeling utterly defeated, Kusla let out a deep sigh.

After a short while, the red-headed Irine came back, bringing lunch in a steaming pot.

She greeted Fenesis, who was alone by the fire, and then glanced at Kusla, who was drinking in the wagon bed. Since Fenesis was staring at him reproachfully, Irine had somewhat realized guess the source of Fenesis' sulkiness.

She served wheat gruel into four bowls from the pot and took two to the wagon,

"Did you tease her again?"

But Kusla, of course, refused to explain. How could he have admitted he teased Fenesis because he could not deal with her worrying about him to his face?

" ... She's just getting herself all upset."

"Good grief, you're like a young apprentice, always causing trouble."

Irine, who worked in a blacksmith's workshop, had the nosy disposition of a meddler.

It was said that she instigated Fenesis into laying the trap the other day.

Given that, it was definitely this girl's fault that Fenesis had been getting closer to Kusla. While the amount of iron would not multiply as women increased in numbers, women would cause the nature of the iron to change.

Now that is scary, Kusla thought.

His stomach growled when he smelled the gruel with melted cheese, so he accepted the meal Irine brought, but nothing more.

Perhaps because he was always upsetting Fenesis, Irine gave up and did not press matters further.

"So where's Weyland?"

"He said he was going to play at the rear of the line. Who knows when he'll come back?"

"Eh Then do I leave some food?"

She asked and looked down at the other bowl in her hands.

In different ways than Fenesis, Irine often left herself open to teasing.

"Do not sound so happy."

"Wh-what do you mean!?"

Irine, quick to respond, and easy to understand, would likely the poster girl at a bar if she were to work there.

She got along well with Fenesis, perhaps because she was such a contrast with the pure, white Fenesis.

"If you can't finish it alone, give some to me. It's a waste to throw it out."

"…"

Irine looked at Kusla reluctantly and said,

"Half."

She was probably gluttonous for food as she had once stayed in a workshop where many people lived together.

Kusla nodded silently without making any crude remark, took the other bowl from Irine, and divided half of Weyland's portion into his own bowl.

"Ah, that reminds me,"

Irine added, as if as an afterthought.

```
"There was a rumor even at the cooking tent..."
```

"Huh?"

When Kusla looked suspiciously at her, she was rendered tentative, but continued, "Is the situation in Kazan okay? You're working alongside that Alzen, aren't you?"

As was the widow of the Guild Leader, Irine had taken the position of Guild Leader of the blacksmith's association of the port town Gulbetty. Despite not being respected by anyone and having a hard time, Irine did not complain. That was because she firmly believed in the promise with her husband, a respected craftsman, that she would take over the position and lead the association.

Even Irine, who was usually adamant, seemed uneasy about the future. Kusla understood well that the rumor from the cooks was a clumsy excuse, and given her personality, she could not really tell complicated lies.

Kusla came to this conclusion, but ground his teeth at the fact that there were times he had been fooled by Irine and Fenesis. He pretended that he was chewing the wooden spoon, exaggeratedly shrugged, and asked, "What would you do if I said things were terrible and there was nothing to be done?"

Irine was momentarily startled, but soon glared at Kusla.

"Can you stop with such jokes?"

"When you do not understand something in the workshop, do you immediately go to your master?"

"Ugh!"

"You must have been told often to observe and steal. He really spoils you."

"..."

In terms of logical ability, Fenesis might be superior to Irine.

Irine talked a lot, but was easily held back by her feelings. That impulsiveness was typical of her straightforward personality.

"So, look closely at me, and think about it."

Kusla put on an affectedly pleasing smile; Irine made a disgusted face and

fully bared her teeth. There was a different kind of pleasure in teasing Irine compared with teasing Fenesis.

"Things seem fine for now, but..."

""

Irine looked at Kusla, annoyed.

His shoulders shook with laughter, and then someone appeared.

"Sorry for interrupting your meal."

Kusla looked over and saw three men dressed as mercenaries.

"If it's food you're after, go somewhere else."

"No, no. We heard you guys have tree oil, so could you share some with us?"

The mercenaries were holding well-used cloaks, the animal's fur no long distinguishable.

"Tree oil? Ah, tar, right? We've got some. Hey."

When Kusla called out to Irine, who had been sulking, she took the leather cloaks from the mercenaries, muttering "So self-important."

"Sorry, young lady. It seems like it's going to rain or snow again in the afternoon."

"No, I'm peeved because of that disagreeable one there."

Puzzled, the mercenaries looked at Kusla. He sipped the gruel, ignoring them.

Grumbling away, Irine took the mercenaries' cloaks, then lightly jumped up on the wagon and fished through the luggage.

The tree oil the mercenaries mentioned, called tar or pitch, was a kind of oil obtained by heating a certain kind of wood, and it had various uses like preserving meat or treating skin diseases. Because it was an oil, it also repelled water. Irine and Weyland had made tree oil at the workshop in Gulbetty.

Shortly after they set out on their journey, it had rained, and word seemed to have gotten around that painting tar on would prevent water from seeping through the wagon covers.

The tar was not hard to refine, but it was expensive due to the labor and fuel costs, so it was best to get it when possible. Kusla and everyone made it using the Knights's money, so they were not stingy with it.

Ignoring Irine, Kusla suddenly noticed that Weyland's portion of gruel that he had split with Irine was sitting untouched. He could not bear to let it cool like that, and also, it was something Irine had earned as compensation for her work. Weary, Kusla stood up and took the remaining gruel to the fire. He poured it into Irine's bowl and placed it next to the fire to keep it warm.

While he did that, Fenesis was restlessly eating some gruel with a wooden spoon and forcing herself not to look at Kusla.

"Hey."

When he spoke to her, Fenesis reacted like a startled cat.

However, she did not turn around, and Kusla gave a sneer.

He was bemused at her simple and childish reaction, as well as how she sometimes backed him into a corner.

"You did not know about tar, right? What did you do about rain when you traveled?"

When Kusla asked that normal question, he knew that Fenesis' ears were twitching under her veil. She probably wanted to tell him not to talk so familiarly with her because they were fighting, but she also felt bad about ignoring somebody who was speaking to her.

Of course, Kusla had deliberately called out to her because he enjoyed her reactions.

In the end, it seemed like her sincerity won out.

She turned around unhappily and answered,

"...I used regular oil and...something with the same effect."

"...Heh? The same effect?"

Kusla asked in return, and Fenesis seemed to realize her mistake in continuing the conversation.

She wrinkled her brow like she was suffering a headache, but gave up trying to be stubborn towards Kusla, who again asked what she meant.

"... It was something other than tar, I think,"

She said, and returned her spoon to the bowl.

"Certainly, there is that kind of oil, but it does not come from a tree. It comes from small rivers or ponds. It floats on top of water, and you gather a lot of it with linen and drain the water. It was an oil that was more pitch black, had a strange smell, and burned well."

Fenesis was a foreigner from a place far south of here and astoundingly far to the east from there. He heard that that land was dominated by the scorching sun and endless sand and stone.

Kusla raised his chin slightly. "I've heard there's an oil taken from rocks that has roughly the same effect as tar."

"Yes. It was also called stone oil. But it's more commonly called black pitch."

"Ah, black pitch, I remember now. I've seen it once or twice, but it was only enough to fit in a small bottle. It's something that you definitely cannot get here."

"..."

While Kusla was talking, Fenesis' gaze suddenly became distant. She was seeing somewhere else, and Kusla peered into her eyes and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Eh? Ah, it's nothing..."

Fenesis came to her senses and, a little embarrassed, said,

"I just remembered something, from long ago"

"Long ago?"

"Yes. Long ago I saw a lake of black pitch."

Kusla thought that there was no way she could have seen that, but he remembered that Fenesis had come here from a faraway place. It was so distant that it was spoken of only in fairy tales.

"On days when the sun was blazing, it was so pungent, it was impossible to breathe, but the sight of part of the lake always on fire was incredible. Burning morning, noon, and night, it seemed like the end of the world, and yet also like the beginning..."

Fenesis' expression as she reminisced was one Kusla had seen before. It was the face of someone who had experienced one of the wonders of the world and hence no longer cared what befell them.

Fenesis suddenly smiled with self-derision and said quietly,

"I do not think I can get you to believe me..."

By normal standards, a story about a burning lake would probably be regarded as the delusion of an uneducated girl.

But Kusla was an alchemist and would surely spend his whole life chasing seeming illusions.

"No."

"Huh?"

"I want to hear all the details."

Puzzled, Fenesis stared back at Kusla.

"A lake of black pitch? How big was it? Do you know the exact place? Did fish live

in it? Did the pitch flow in from somewhere? Or did it gush up from the ground? You said one part burns, but why does not the whole thing burn?"

Fenesis blinked incessantly at Kusla's rapid questions.

Kusla was burning with curiosity. If a burning lake exists in this world, then it was possible there were other mysteries as well. That was better evidence than anything that this world was not a boring place, but was filled with mysteries and that it was worth carrying on even through hardships.

"B-but..."

Fenesis said while backing away from Kusla, who was excitedly questioning her. She looked up at Kusla with worried, perhaps slightly criticizing, eyes. And then she said, "But...you will not seriously listen to me, right? So I d-do not want

to...tell you."

Just a bit ago, in response to Fenesis' sincere concern, Kusla had pinched her nose and wiggled it around. This was Fenesis' justified revenge. But when it came to willfulness, this alchemist rivaled even a king.

"I'm not interested in you, but I am interested in what you saw."

"Ah!"

Fenesis was so taken aback that she snapped up straight, but Kusla placed his bowl of gruel by Fenesis without hesitation.

"Look, I'll share my cheese, so tell me."

At this, Fenesis took a big breath, on the verge of yelling, but in the end let it out exhaustedly.

"You are...incorrigible..."

"What have you seen of me up until now?"

Offended, Fenesis stared up at Kusla from beneath her lashes.

"...Meanie."

Fenesis seemed to have mustered up a lot of courage to say this, and even though she had averted her gaze, she looked worriedly at Kusla once more.

He said with a serious face,

"I'm not mean. I'm an alchemist."

Fenesis made an extremely reluctant face, but did not look away from Kusla.

"...It is as what I saw."

She was an honest girl.

"Of course."

As befitting alchemy which turns lead to gold, Kusla changed his expression to a smile.

Fenesis was still reluctant, but finally sighed with resignation, and also seeming a bit happy, falteringly began to tell him about the scene she saw long ago.

Fenesis finished telling Kusla about the mysterious burning lake about the same time Irine finished coating the mercenaries' cloaks in tar.

Perhaps not satisfied helping with only the meal, Irine felt quite refreshed after her manual labor, but when she returned to the fire, she immediately became suspicious.

That was because Fenesis, whose mood had improved by having someone listen to her story, was servilely making tea, which she had recently learned how to do, for Kusla.

"I'm worried she'll be cheated by a bad person."

When Fenesis went to the cart to put away the tea leaves, Irine said, insinuating something.

"You mean like Weyland?"

"Weyland would be the lesser evil."

Kusla shrugged. After it was fully dark, Weyland finally returned. For some reason, he had brought a heap of books. He'd probably said something about returning them when he got to Kazan, but whether he actually would was doubtful.

Weyland shamelessness was mildly shocking even for Kusla, but his interest in books was another matter. While Kusla was browsing enthusiastically through the books, Weyland took one of the books and presented it to Fenesis, who had a similarly keen interest.

"Here, this is for little UI."

"Eh? For...me?"

A guffawing Weyland handed the book to the confused Fenesis. Bewildered, she timidly opened it, and Kusla too could see the magnificent illustrations.

"This is..."

"Apparently it's a collection of folklore and legends about Kazan and the surrounding area. Because little UI does not seem averse to this kind of thing~"

u n

Still with the same absentminded expression, Fenesis looked at Weyland, and then at the book in her hands.

Then she looked once more at Weyland and gave a tender smile.

```
"Thank you very much."
```

"Nah, nothing special~"

Weyland was a perfect womanizer.

"This is for little Irine."

"Can you stop calling me that?"

Irine, who was surely a top notch skilled craftsman than others though conscious of her youth, seemed a bit put off at being called "little", but obediently took the book.

She was taken aback when she opened it up.

```
"Huh, this is ...?"
```

"It's a cookbook~"

"A cookbook?"

Kusla asked this. Why give such a thing to Irine? He wondered. Weyland laughed, saying, "Look, little Irine, you often help with the meals for the craftsmen, right? I thought you'd be interested~"

```
"Ah, no, that is ...."
```

Irine was confused. Kusla felt as though he saw something a little unusual for Weyland to be wrong. Irine was helping to earn some pocket money, or to kill time, or to distract herself from her worries about the future, and so Weyland's assumption was clearly wrong.

However, while Kusla had such a thought, Irine embraces the book in her chest and shyly said, "...Th-thank you."

Moreover, she expressed her gratitude happily and bashfully like a maiden receiving a gift for the first time. Kusla was surprised at her unexpected

response, and Weyland nodded like it was a matter of fact.

"Wha~t?"

Two happy women and the smug Weyland.

Kusla, who did not understand women's feelings at all, found nothing amusing in this.

"And? Is there anything for me?"

"Aah? But the books will be returned later, so don't get them dirty~"

Weyland said unpleasantly. Kusla knew he definitely said that on purpose, but because the two women were chuckling at the situation, he was even less amused.

"Did you forget about the favor in Gulbetty?"

Kusla asked. Weyland shrugged and quickly reached out and hugged Fenesis' small shoulders.

"I heard little UI saved me?"

Although Fenesis was a little surprised, she was not scared of Weyland like she had been when they first met. With Weyland's arms still around her shoulders, she was giggling like she had been tickled.

"I heard that too."

Even Irine followed suit, her eyes seeming to say "Serves you right."

u n

Kusla thought trouble would beckon if he opened his mouth, so he silently took a book from the pile and forced himself to concentrate on its discussion of sulfur.

No matter how little ahead one could see, if one was to keep moving forward, a conclusion could be made somehow or other. As if to prove that, Kusla's group was standing on a hill overlooking the town of Kazan.

Even though there had been nothing but plains that continued forever, God had begun working two days ago.

The town of Kazan, and the large mining area spread out behind it could be seen from the top of the hill, the sight could be called the work of the ancient gods.

They often assumed they were reaching Kazan, but it was the previous night when they realized they were right on top of it.

Alzen and his men had probably been considering whether to enter Kazan up until the last moment. If they thought they were still far from Kazan, it would be easier to head back. If they thought they were close, they would probably approach the city even if it meant loosening the reins.

"It's like a fortress, huh,"

Said Irine while holding down her hair, which was blown by the cold, dry wind.

"More like ruins~"

Weyland replied, Kusla thought that both were right.

Kazan was made as a town at the entrance of the mining area, akin to a gateway.

The city walls were high, and they surrounded the huge town like a sturdy fortress. As the color of the wals closely resembled that of the nearby rocky mountain, the town resembled ruins weathered by winds for hundreds of years.

At this moment, over a thousand knights, who had occupied Kazan were apparently stationed there.

Even though they had taken over the town, they had simply dissolved the council that managed Kazan in the stead of Latria's queen, and banished the people who had fought in the war, but over two thousand people remained in the town.

Nevertheless, according to the report of the knights who had thoroughly checked the number of kitchens and vacant houses after Kazan surrendered, there were still plenty of houses for the colonists to live in, as well as jobs.

When they heard that report, everybody in the unit cheered wholeheartedly.

It was the moment they won their wager.

It meant that there was not unrest in Kazan and that Latria's political situation was calm despite the news of the queen's conversion, and the settlement was only a matter of time.

Alzen and his men had probably ridden their horses hard, keeping in contact with the knights' forces stationed in various places so as to keep abreast of the situation.

No doubt they had also discerned the attitudes of the nobles who came with tributes in hand during the journey, and they had concluded that everything was alright.

Their good fortune exceeded their expectations.

Fenesis, who believed in that sort of thing, was of course staring enthusiastically at Kazan.

For her part, Irine was becoming angsty, and got off the wagon.

"All hands! Advance!"

Someone in the cavalry shouted while waving the flag on his lance.

Everyone began moving quietly without cheering, probably because they were so full of hope and happiness that they could not shout.

Kusla's group advanced with the flow.

And of course he too was busy calculating what he would do once he got past the city walls.

"What will you do when you enter the town?"

Suddenly posed with this question, Kusla stared fixedly at her for a few moments.

```
"... Ah?"
"Errr ...."
```

Fenesis said, perplexed by Kusla's unexpected response.

But Kusla was confused too.

"Did I not explain last night? I'll descend on the libraries of the nobles and

companies with that rascal Weyland. You do your job too, because we do not know when something might happen."

When he said that, Fenesis blinked in surprise and said worriedly,

"Ah, um ... that is not what I meant..."

"As for me, I might look for some cute girls who've suffered during the war,"

Weyland suddenly interrupted the conversation.

"And I'll even give them flowers"

"Ugh, Mr Weyland, not again ... that's not funny."

Fenesis turned a weary gaze on Weyland, but he was happy just for her to be looking at him.

Kusla turned both a cold gaze and cold words on Weyland.

"We won't do anything. We'll just look at what we should look at."

He was not reproaching the light-hearted Weyland, or Irine, or even Fenesis. Kusla had come here for this reason and was living for that purpose.

He was not going to waste a moment.

Wasting time would make Magdala that much further away.

"You're so serious~"

Weyland was fed up. Then he looked at Fenesis.

"Is there anything little UI wants to do~?"

Fenesis had been looking at the stubborn Kusla with slightly sad eyes, but bashful when Weyland asked her that.

It seemed there was something, so he had brought it up with Kusla to lay the groundwork.

I was too thick and did not notice, Kusla thought to himself.

"Um, there is something I want to see."

"Oh, what's that"?"

Unlike his attitude inside the workshop, Weyland was a typical womanizer

outside. Kusla, annoyed at how Weyland enjoying his conversation with Fenesis, was also a bit interested in what she wanted to see, and he stole a glance at her out of the corner of his eye.

"They are in this book I borrowed, but I have heard there are many old legends in Kazan."

"Ah, that's right". That's because it was originally a mine before Latria existed. It seems it's been there since lots of immigrants came from the East over five hundred years ago"."

"Is that so?"

"Well, I've just heard a few things. And? What does little UI want to see?" "Ah, yes. Um, it's this"

Fenesis reached up and grabbed something from the wagon bed. As he watched Fenesis struggle to pick up a large book, Kusla had a quiet urge to tease her.

But Weyland was there, and Irine had returned to the wagon, so he behaved himself. Fenesis, who of course did not notice anything, opened the book and showed a page to Weyland. When Kusla turned to look, he could see several illustrations, although they could better be described as copies of some other pictures. There were many people and a monster like a dragon. Perhaps because the dragon was breathing fire, a heroic man was resisting with a large shield.

"Ehhhh~? Little UI, you're interested in this kind of thing? That's surprising~" Surely he felt it was the type of adventure story young boys would enjoy.

But there were onlookers around the dragon and hero, and the atmosphere was somehow carefree, just like an exhibition. Perhaps Fenesis was captivated by that relaxed feeling.

She said bashfully,

"Um ... But I want to see this. I heard it is drawn somewhere in town that was originally a mine."

"Hmm."

Weyland nodded, raised his head from the book, and smiled at Fenesis.

"Then, I'll take you there."

"Eh, really?"

"It's good to read technical books, but you can learn a lot from seeing the ruins of a mine. I'll just bring you along then"

"Thank you very much."

Fenesis expressed her thanks with a wide smile, and Weyland nodded in satisfaction. But his glance at Kusla suggested that he had done this very much on purpose.

Kusla, vexed by Weyland's frivolous actions and Fenesis' innocence, pretended to ignore them and decided not to show his feelings at all costs, because Irine was watching.

Right then, the company became noisy. Alzen, leading the vanguard of the Azami's Crest unit that was entering the town first, opened Kazan's gates. Everyone probably saw this as the moment their new world opened up before them.

Of course, Kusla was no exception.

The knowledge and techniques of the pagans left behind in Kazan. There awaited a new world he had yet to comprehend.

He told himself not to be rash.

But like everyone else, it was impossible for Kusla to suppress his burgeoning hopes.

Act 2

Kazan could be said to be a town built to take in the items flowing out from the hills. While other mining towns would typically be connected to a mine, through hundreds of years of excavating, the mining hills in proximity to Kazan had become quite a distance north.

Through many years of mining, the hills were weathered, seemingly reclining, only the town before it.

For that reason, there remained a little valley between the hill and the town, one that belonged to a massive hill. Such a hill was reminiscent of the delta at the mouth of a river.

The town walls of Kazan were sturdy stone walls, with lots of money expended upon them, probably earned due to the vast expanse of rich materials. And the Knights somehow managed to conquer this town, Kusla was amazed. There were obvious signs of the town that was conquered. Passing through the thick walls covered with scars, they entered the town, and appearing in their eyes was a town of stone they had never seen before. On first glance, one might even assume the town was chiselled out of rock.

However the reason why the town embittered a fleeting impression was due to the fact that the stone pavements did not fit in with the rest. There was no life.

There were signs of activity in the town.

But everyone present remained hidden behind the doors, silent, terrified of the people from enemy lands.

"We sure don't seem popular here"

"Of course. We're the invaders."

Kusla and Weyland got off the wagon, chatting away.

The two young ladies were hidden behind the hood of the wagon bed. Moments ago, this place was a battlefield, and though the Knights had stationed their men, the defeated remnants might come raiding at any given opportunity. The mercenaries too kept quiet, not laughing away like before, watching their surroundings warily without letting their guard down.

The Knights who had conquered this town remained on guard all over the streets, along with the mercenaries, clearly indicating that the situation was not completely under control.

Kusla surveyed the surroundings, and muttered,

"But it is a little surprising."

"Hmm? How so~?"

"Look at them, those people on their guard."

Kusla stared at the Knights and mercenaries who had bandages wrapped around their faces. To these men, the Azami's Crest Forces arriving only after the war would be having it easy. Kusla had assumed that they would be giving hostile looks, but it seemed they were all relieved.

"This is a foreign land far away after all~"

Weyland said,

"It's a good thing that they conquered this town, but they are still uneasy there"

"Is that so? They're all war-hardened veterans though."

"Well they are", but the South doesn't have such cold stone towns, and the skies are all cloudy. The wine and food differ too, right? You simply never noticed it, Kusla."

"Hm, I see."

Even if he did understand the hearts of humans, he would never master it to such a detailed manner.

Thus, he wondered if Fenesis experienced the same uneasiness when she was on the run.

"So little UI here is really a tough girl."

While Kusla was thinking about Fenesis, he was left rattled by this statement.

"I heard that when then the main forces arrive, a feast will be held". Southern styled Dinner and Dance for all to recuperate"

"You're participating?"

Kusla asked as his eyes narrowed, and Weyland grinned.

"Why not" The real investigation of this town will only start after the feast". No reason for me to miss out no"

"We managed to get you out of Gulbetty. Help us out here."

Kusla noted in annoyance, and Weyland hung a smile, continuing as a matter of fact,

"You got closer to little UI thanks to that, and now you're saying such a thing~?"

"Wha-"

What preposterous words are you saying? So Kusla wanted to say, but he could not muster those words.

It was true that due to the incident involving Weyland, Kusla would not argue much with Fenesis, and Fenesis would not simply show her own obstinacy.

However, Weyland's words seemed to imply that it was all thanks to him; his thought process left Kusla speechless all the time. With a hound whose food was taken away from, he glared at Weyland, "You remember this."

Weyland gave a hearty grin in response.

As they chatted, they arrived at the center of the town.

There was a pool and fountain in the middle of this bustling town. This facility indicated the prosperity and technical skills the craftsmen of this town had attained. The money and manpower required to build a fountain, with sufficiently high pressure for the water to flow through flawless, was surely exorbitant.

No matter how grandeur a fountain was, Kusla and company were already used to it. However, even they were left speechless before it, for the fountain was unique in shape.

"A dragon-shaped fountain~?"

Weyland stroked the beard on his chin, saying this,

There was a bronze dragon statue in the middle of the pool, one bigger than a man. The dragon was looking up to the sky with its mouth opened.

The fountain was spouting water from the dragon's mouth, and there was a pipe as the side of its mouth.

Surely this bronze statue was a Pagan's symbol, and everyone present widened their eyes. Ever since they arrived in foreign lands, there was none that indicated the unfamiliarity more than this.

Kusla and the others arrived at the temporary command post established at the plaza of the dragon pool to be informed of their accommodation and future work.

But once they reported their names as alchemist, the secretary looked up in surprise.

```
"Professor Marcus Lloyd is of old age now, is he not?"

"He's the prized sword. We're for cutting."

"..."
```

It was common for there to be breakdown in communications. The secretary remained wary, but did not intend to affirm.

"This is the inn you are allocated."

"Also, the higher ups ordered us to review the books left in this town. Of course, we aren't talking about the Epics. There should be some books or parchments relating to mines and smithing, I believe. I do hope you can tell us where they are."

The secretary sized up Kusla and Weyland, and sighed.

"There is a map of this town. Go ask the ones in charge."

"You have been here ever since the town was conquered, I believe? Is there lots of them"

Kusla anxious asked, and the secretary shrugged.

"We have yet to peel away the floors of the nobles' mansions, nothing to report."

The secretary was young, but it seemed he did arrive in this town along with the conquering forces, and showed no timidity in the face of the alchemists.

"I suppose you know that if there is anything strange in those books, they will be handed over to the heretical inquisitors; thus, I do advise you not to keep them for yourselves."

"Leave those words to God. Those people are the ones keeping these books for themselves."

The secretary merely snorted in response to Kusla's frivolous remarks, "Ahh, yes." He said, "Are you staying in the town temporarily? Or?"

"A workshop for us please."

Undaunted, Kusla stated his request.

"I see. Now then, please state your name here."

The secretary frisked a thick book, flipped through a few pages, and pointed at a blank space while saying this. It seemed they were to register the names of the residents here in order. The page was new, clearly harking the fact that Kazan shall be reborn again.

Also, given how lax such an important thing was dealt with, one could not help but feel that this place was completely different from nitpicking the rules and customs of the old towns. For an ordinary town, surely layers of bureaucracy would be required for the residents before registering their names in the book.

Furthermore, there were those who hoped to stand out in the old towns. To earn prestige, they would have to endure for years, hone their skills tirelessly, obey their superiors, and only gain the position they yearned for in the twilight of their lives. In Kazan, those with ability, wits and luck could easily attain their ideal position.

Kusla received the quill pen, wrote his name, and handed it over to Weyland, who too wrote his name. While the secretary was about to nod away, the pen

was returned.

"Please forget this."

The names of their two assistants. If they were recorded inside this book, there would be a drastic difference in outcome.

The secretary remained nonchalant, but Weyland chuckled.

"Kusla, four in total...well, you can't have too much manpower. Do work hard here."

"Leave it to us."

Weyland joked in return.

Kusla and the others went off to the inn, left the carriage, and unveiled the hood. The two ladies looked displeased at being unable to view the town, and once they got out, they deliberately took a deep sigh.

Of course, their faces were brimming with an equal amount of displeasure, curiosity and excitement.

"Now then, shall we get to work?"

"If you start yawning, I'll poke your ears."

If it had been the Fenesis of old, she would pale with shock, but at this moment, she merely cringed back, and smiled.

Shall I really do it? Kusla wondered. However, actual action should only be used in times of emergencies.

"Now, what do we do next? Shall I wear male clothing if I want to walk around the streets?"

Male clothing was packed in the wagon just in case, but the defiant Irine would always yap away, and so Kusla chose to irritate her, "Well, nobody can tell even if you are dressed like this, I guess."

"Wha!?"

She glared at Kusla's statement, and was left all the more peeved as Weyland guffawed.

"Shouldn't such a dangerous place as long as you don't go to those empty places or go out at night."

"Hm, then what do we do next? Where do we go?"

Irine folded her arms, scowling as she asked,

"First to the blacksmith guild of this town. Most of the important books are there."

"The professors will be investigating about three-four days later. We should do so before them~"

"Of course."

Kusla nodded, and continued,

"Prepare some paper and ink."

"Feels like I'm now your assistant."

"Sure know your role now."

Irine sighed at Kusla's teasing.

Later, when they walked onto the stone streets, Fenesis and Irine widened their eyes. They were used to seeing streets of dirt, and houses made of grey cement walls and wooden rows; the town to them was practically a mirage.

"These are all made with chisels..."

"Most likely."

The railing of the stairs and the pillars in the houses were adorned with delicate ornaments, showcasing the artisan's skills.

However, they merely cheered at the beginning as it was a rare sight to begin with.

There were signs of war all over the town. Specifically, as the houses were mostly burned down, there were quite a few streets of squatter settlements, which Fenesis and even the others were left aghast upon seeing.

They were the invaders.

The blacksmith guild in the town of Kazan shared the tradition of the other

countries, in that it was stationed in the middle of the town. In other words, the organization in town with the largest contribution was situated there. The blacksmith guild was on the main road next to the pool plaza, the one eyecatching area to Kusla and the others.

Of course, Fenesis and Irine's eyes were turned towards the bronze dragon statue as they passed by.

"Does such a dragon really exist?"

With a serious look, Fenesis asked, even though her own existence was a rarity by itself despite it not being as preposterous as a dragon. Beside her, Irine muttered with a conflicted look, "Such fine craftsmanship...no, looking at the leakage as the water passes through, we too..."

Everyone's thoughts differ when looking at the same thing. It was a matter of fact, but the stark difference in observations was particularly noteworthy.

"This dragon does seem a little strange."

Irine commented, and Kusla and the others too felt the same. The dragon was looking straight up, seemingly in pain. Perhaps this posture was maintained to allow the water to sputter straight up.

"Maybe the guild will have records on how this fountain came about."

Hearing Kusla's words, Irine and even Fenesis' eyes dazzled.



There were the Knights' guards standing before the guild, perhaps to ward off theft, for there were lots of books that could be sold and metal ores placed within. Kusla and the others were naturally flagged down by the guards, but with the permit flashed before them, they were no longer obstructed. It was likely that they felt Kusla and Weyland could not possibly steal anything with two ladies by their side.

Thus, after passing through the entrance.

While their reactions all differed, the one word they said was the said, "Amazing."

Once they entered, they arrived at the hall that was also the canteen, the construct similar to the blacksmith guild of the ex-pagan town Gulbetty, except the difference in size. The size difference of the building clearly showed this guild monopolized the profits, and that it was a mining town operating on a grand scale.

"Amazing..."

Irine marvelled, but the tone seemed to imply that she was on the verge of tears.

Looking up at the ceiling, she resembled a martyr mentioning God at every given moment.

There was an iron dragon statue dangling from the thick frame of the ceiling, surveying the bottom.

The statue was stunningly intricate, and clearly, it was not casted. The head and limbs were complex, while the fineness of the neck lines, the roundness of the body, the slides of the scales, surely not of them could be done unless by hand.

Any guild with such skilled craftsmen that could create such a delicate piece of art would be revered in any town.

"This one is amazing too"..."

Weyland noted as his eyes focused on the wall.

There were all kinds of minerals samples adorned on the wall, probably the

produce of nearby mines. There were also amazing looking crystallized gold and silver, each of them so pure that they could be processed without mercury or cupellation. Such wonderful crystals would probably be the reason as to why the Ancients mistook metals for 'plants'.

Given how the Knights showed such self-restrain to not rob the place, Kusla was left a little surprised.

Perhaps they felt there was no need to, for everything belonged to the Knights.

"Amazing."

Marvelling next was Fenesis, staring at the walls facing each other, adorned with ores.

There were countless wooden tiles with words on them, and a few paintings.

It was likely these names and paintings were all depicting the masters in the guild. Looking at their clothing, the masters in these paintings contributed to this guild, participated in the running of the town, and became prosperous.

They all showed confidence that bored on arrogance, without exception, and the rich history added to that. Such were their appearances that one might wonder if they ruled this town before.

Finally, even Kusla said,

"This is amazing."

Hearing that, Weyland, irine and Fenesis turned around to look.

Truly, it was amazing.

Kusla merely stood at the entrance, staring at the trio.

The trio shot skeptical looks at Kusla, wondering what made him so amazed.

He merely shrugged, saying,

"Starting today, we can use this place as much as we want to. Isn't this amazing?"

Here was an alchemist boasting the guarantee he had obtained for this town.

Typically, Irine would surely frown upon hearing those mischievous words of his, but at this moment, even her lips curled into a smile.

"Let us enjoy all the fortunes that has been accumulated here."

There were vast variety of minerals extracted from the mines here, of fine quality, and masses of craftsmen with astounding skills, resulting in what should be a vast amount of knowledge and skills accumulated over history.

The moment they devoured this in avarice, there appeared an unspeakable pleasure derived from a different appetite.

Digging out everything, and fuelling themselves.

Kusla's lips curled as he pushed aside the door, entering the treasury of knowledge and history.

The best refining methods of minerals extracted from these lands would be worth fortunes.

Such knowledge was crystallized after countless experimentations, improvements, and hard work. Spending on fuel and minerals was a huge capital spend, let alone the manpower required in the process. Also, there was the most vital factor of them all, called luck.

Of course, the skills a few workshop masters would personally research upon were extremely valuable. It was with such skills that some were able to smelt metals superior to other workshops, even though the raw materials were the same.

Other than craftsmen, there were also doctors and builders who would conceal their own skills.

The ecstasy of revealing secrets was massive, like prying a bashful girl naked.

Resistance would only leave elation, and the more resistance there was, the bigger the joy.

"Just a simple code. Digits, words...and astrology signs. What about you?"

"Just codes imitating ancient myths. The South's books can't reach here, so I guess this is all I can do. A few mistakes in writing."

The masters would conceal the keys to their most advance skills, from their disciples no less.

As long as their disciples would not learn of the crucial skills, they could maintain their positions as masters.

The result of this was a secret code used in Kazan. There was no way these masters would have expected external enemies raiding them, for it had strong walls; thus, their codes were no match from the Southern invaders.

"It's written in this book too, and this too...ahh, this too."

Kusla kept flipping through the pages, and inserted paper slips in obvious places. While the parts did not contain heretical records, the depiction of marks or codes were unique, with some clearly showing lewdness. If the heretical inquisitors were to notice, they might end up sealed up.

Fenesis, who was copying them, froze up as she saw the stack of books and parchments piling up.

While everyone was working on with vigor, Kusla suddenly noticed something.

Irine was at a corner of the library, flipping through the books, disquieted.

"What?"

"Erm, eh?"

Irine jolted, and turned her head around.

"If you need to urinate, get out."

"N-no you idiot!"

Irine yelled with a reddened face, and she realized her shouted attracted Fenesis and Weyland's attention.

"So what's with you? Stop dithering."

"Uuu..."

With a grimace, Irine was left speechless for quite a while.

What now? Right when Kusla was feeling intrigued, Weyland noted,

"Ahh, perhaps little Irine can't read~?"

"Huh?"

She was the ex-leader of a guild though, Kusla shot Weyland a look, and looked back at Irine, only to be taken aback.

Irine dropped her head, her face completely read.

"You can't read at all?"

Irine did not lift her head when faced with Kusla's questions, merely glancing up at him, muttering, "I can...read some...ordinary words..."

This really was unlike the usual Irine, and Kusla nearly burst out laughing.

However, there was a reason as to why he did not mock Irine.

"You should have said so."

He sighed, and Irine shrank back immediately.

He did not have an opinion on Irine being illiterate, and neither was he implying that it was fine for Irine to be illiterate, that she was only required to have skills just because she was a blacksmith.

The codes written in the books were all digits. A unique language by itself, it was originally used for Orthodox clergymen or priest to discuss theology and faith with their allies all over to the world. For those in the towns, it was likely only those who loved knowledge could understand.

Naturally, Kusla and Weyland could read and write. It was likely Fenesis learned it while studying at the monastery, and surely she had no problems reading and writing.

However, looking at Irine, it seemed she did not know the common words ordinary people used.

Irine was probably mindful about this, for her face was red. Back in Gulbetty, she had always polished the items in the guild sparkling clean, and surely that had an intent behind it. Perhaps it was her fulfilling her duties as leader, for she was illiterate.

And also, that might also be a reason why Irine was harshly scorned by the

others.

"There are lots of picture scrolls on that shelf. Go check on that."

As to be expected of a building of a guild monopolizing the fortunes of the town, there were dozens of books within. Kusla and the others were reading from a sealed library containing precious information. There were a few other libraries that were not cordoned, and over there were books rich masters would be interested in, or collected to showcase their authority.

""

However, Kusla's instructions sounded insulting to Irine.

She lowered her head dejectedly, as though she was in the same position as Irine.

Again, Kusla sighed.

"Don't get careless just because they are picture scrolls."

"...Hm?"

"There are many instances where some dangerous matters are not to be expressed in words, and thus, in paintings. You're a craftsman; if you see some strange tool on them, you can tell on first glance. Filter out those you don't know, haven't seen before, or anything strange you fine. We don't know what's hidden inside there."

Without stopping, Kusla then continued on, "Do you understand me?" Irine herself was taken aback by this.

"U-understood."

She blankly responded, and nodded away while seemingly trying to convince herself, stumbling awkwardly to the shelf by the side.

Kusla snorted, and was about to return to his own work.

He then lifted his head, for he sensed two stares directed at him.

"What?"

Weyland and Fenesis exchanged looks.

"Nothing...never expected you to say such serious words, Kusla". I thought you would be mocking Irine or raging at her, no"?"

"..."

Weyland directed the topic at Fenesis, who accepted the question somewhat perturbedly, nodding tentatively.

"Maximize the use of the tools we have now. This isn't the time for fun and games."

Weyland shrugged in response to Kusla's words, and turned towards Fenesis.

She, who tried fortune telling to know if the four of them could be together, took Weyland's look and smiled at Kusla elatedly.

"I do not believe your words."

"Huh."

Whatever, Kusla snorted, and really got down to work.

His objective was to steal all the skills and knowledge from the bookshelves, and he would do whatever it took. For this reason he arrived, and Irine's feelings did not matter to him.

He had to give his utmost.

Even if he had to defy his own personality, even if it was not as he wished.

"I'm heading towards Magdala."

Kusla muttered as he reached his hand for another book.

For meals, each of them ate with one hand. When weary, they would take a book or parchment, and walk around to rest. Once their waist and legs stiffened, they would sit down again to work.

The sun set, and the sky got dark; despite the frigid pains from the frosty air, it did not matter to them. They had blankets draped upon them, but for Fenesis in particular, she would use the candlelight to warm her fingertips while swapping out the candles.

She had been copying for an entire day. There was nothing more laborious than copying in the monastery. The copies were written over entire years, and

looking at the words, one could deduce which pages were written during which seasons. In midsummer, the ink would seep, and in midwinter, there would be traces of blood, for the fingertips cracked, and the font crooked.

In terms of stubbornness and sincerity, Fenesis was no different from a martyr.

She persisted to write even in the middle of the night, but she could not control her will, and let slip the pen.

"Have a little rest."

Kusla said right as she was trying to hold the pen with her stiffened hand.

"No...I am not tired."

"Rest."

Kusla barked with a commanding tone, and Fenesis shivered.

He knew she was lying when she said she was not tired. The long journey had taken its toll on her, and she was to copy without rest.

"...Understood."

But despite this, Fenesis only submitted after much apprehension.

Her body was all stiffened, and she could not stand up right, yet she remained so defiant. If they had been in Gulbetty, Kusla would surely nitpick or advise her, but not this time as she was unexpectedly reliable.

If possible, Kusla wished that Fenesis would be decisive enough to take little naps like Weyland whenever she realized her efficiency was dropping, without him having to remind her, but this might be a tall order for her.

Once he saw Fenesis sit on a chair and sway like a wooden puppet, he inadvertently sighed.

"Don't move."

He put the book down, stood up from the blanket that was hanging from the wall, went behind Fenesis' chair, and pulled her chair out.

Only then could Fenesis stand up, but it seemed her knees were stiff, her legs unable to straighten.

Right when she was about to collapse, Kusla grabbed her by the neck from the back.

"Just like a stray cat."

Kusla chuckled, and Fenesis could not turn her head to the back, as her shoulders were likely stiff. Instead, there was a little groan coming from deep within the throat, one of humiliation, rage and shame.

"Goodness...hey, lie down."

Kusla grabbed Fenesis' neck, and dragged her to the blanket he was on, tossing her onto it.

She let out a little squeal, and it pricked at Kusla's sadism.

"You'll soften up once you get warm. Just sleep for now."

Fenesis laid on the blanket, and at that moment, the sleepiness she had repressed till this point surged out; she did not roll about, the ears under her veil merely twitched in response to Kusla's words.

Kusla put the blanket over her, and stood up again.

He went towards the bookshelf by the side. On that side, irine was basically just like Fenesis, cold and weary like a dying bug, shrivelled up in the pile of picture scrolls.

The fact that she was the only one who could not read really wounded her pride. Even so, she did not remain delirious for long, and kept working hard. Kusla was left impressed, thinking that it was no wonder she had such astounding blacksmith skills at such a young age.

Without saying anything else, he took away the picture scroll in her hands, grabbed her by the back of her neck like Fenesis did, and dragged her off. She did not seem to resist, for she laid down by Fenesis side, and fell asleep immediately.

Without further ado, Kusla again went back to work.

As the silent night alone engulfed the room, the soft breathing of two could be heard. It seemed Weyland would wake up from his nap moments left.

He breathed out to warm his fingertips and allow himself to flip through the pages, thinking.

This might be what Fenesis had been hoping for.

"Tch."

He clicked his tongue, this isn't so bad, he berated himself from having such a thought.

On this night, Kusla worked till dawn. Like sisters, Fenesis and Irine were sleeping soundly like sisters, while Weyland was leering at them. Kusla went over to kick Weyland in the back, and kicked the two assistants awake while he was at it.

The two girls woke up, and Kusla in turn laid down upon the blanket the duo slept on, taking a nap. While Weyland teased Kusla for being too conniving with the blanket, Kusla naturally ignored him, and had no intention of switching to a cold blanket.

Soon after, Kusla was rendered awake by the noise in town. The noise originated from the entrance of the guild, and he could not help but think, this plaza sure is bustling. The main forces of the Azam's Crest might have entered the town.

The sunlight shone through the blinds made of metal sheets, and it was obvious the sun had already risen high up.

Kusla got up, and stretched his back. Before the work table was Fenesis, alone as she wordlessly kept copying.

"Good morning."

The tone in her voice implied that she was feeling fine.

"Your hand's fine?"

How is the work going? Kusla's words had such an implication. Fenesis looked at Kusla, and slowly raised her right hand.

"Hm? What is that?"

"Mr Weyland did it. Said it makes it easier to write."

Fenesis' arm was wrapped completely in bandages, from shoulder to fingertip.

And on closer look, the hand and fingertips were tied together with cloth.

"... Take a little rest when needed."

Kusla never expected the amount of care Weyland would show for Fenesis, and felt intimidated, for that was all he could only say.

Fenesis looked at her hand, took a deep breath, stretched her back, "I am fine." She said.

"But...it's so noisy outside and so quiet inside. Where did that Weyland go to?"

"He went out with Miss Irine."

Fenesis said as she went back to work.

With his back turned on Fenesis, Kusla was about to pick up a book he was going to investigate, only to stop upon hearing her words.

"What?"

"They left. The Knights sent a messenger, asking for us to choose a building for a workshop."

"Wha!"

Kusla abruptly turned around, and Fenesis seemed to have realized something from his reaction as she turned toward him, "When!?"

She could not help but pull her neck in upon seeing Kusla's violent reaction, and timidly answered, "A moment ago...more or less..."

"...argh!"

Kusla cursed as he looked up at the ceiling.

"Choose a workshop? What right does that fellow have to act as a representative of a workshop! He's eyeing the ownership of a workshop, that scoundrel..."

In any case, it is the job of the workshop representative, the master, to

purchase materials, designate the research plans, and propose research into risks. Surely it was the authority of the master to determine where the workshop was going to be built in the town.

Kusla gritted his teeth, cursing his carelessness for falling asleep while wrapped in the blanket.

Even if he went off to negotiate with the Knights, he would merely be rebuffed as a shameless clown.

He sighed hard, and collapsed upon the chair opposite Fenesis, completely drained.

"...But"

Fenesis cautiously spoke up. Kusla lazily leaned on the backrest of the chair, looking up at the ceiling, giving Fenesis the look of a cursed one.

"If Mr Weyland and Miss Irine have gone out to choose, surely they will be able to choose a fine workshop, no?"

"..."

Kusla closed his eyes upon hearing these comforting words, and again sighed.

It was truly like Weyland to bring Irine along. He could then declare that as Irine and he were the ones who loved smelting, they should be choosing the workshop.

It was likely that Fenesis was fooled by such words.

"I do not know what the authority of a workshop is...but every one of us can use the workshop fairly, no?"

That would have been fine if they were filial servants to God or simple sheep. Unfortunately, Kusla and the others were alchemists who only cared about their own benefits. If they were to negotiate with the Knights, they could improve their relationship with the Knights. Surely this would affect the future.

However, Fenesis continued on,

"And every single one has whatever they can do, whatever they cannot do and specialties. I do not know how a furnace should be shaped, but I can read

words. I think that in your case, you prefer to find new knowledge more than anything else."

So what? Kusla nearly blurted out and reproached Fenesis.

But he swallowed his words, got up, and let out a deep sigh.

"Get down to finding something big again."

This is the only thing I can do to achieve an equal standing to that fellow. So Kusla thought as he said, "Yes!" but Fenesis seemed extraordinarily happy as she answered with rigor.

Noon passed, yet Weyland and Irine had yet to return. It was a large mining town, and surely the scale of the craftsmen streets were majestic. They probably were dazzled over the choice of workshops. Haste would get them nowhere at this point, so Kusla could only continue working.

But when it was time for lunch, he started to yawn frequently. While fatigue was the biggest factor, another reason was that he had yet to discover new things.

Most of the records contained an overview of mineral analysis from special mineral veins, the best ways to extract them, the shape of the furnace, the choice of fuel, and different catalysts. Of course, just obtaining such knowledge was worth a fortune.

Furthermore, there were books that contained ownership of the mineral veins, privileges, settlements of mining areas disputes, certificates that when used would fetch a huge sum.

Yet what Kusla yearned for were not some formal matters.

He yearned skills that could counter whatever he knew, or knowledge that would be carelessly sealed.

But at this point, he could not find such a thing. No matter which book it was, they were all the knowledge or skills brought from the South, improved over decades on these lands.

Again Kusla stretched his back, and even Fenesis, seated opposite him, followed suit. Kusla narrowed his eyes at her, and said, "Sleep."

"Fuuaaahh...it is all your fault."

He merely shrugged off Fenesis' protest, and stood up.

"...Where are you going?"

"Does that have anything to do with you?"

Kusla coldly retorted. Fenesis did not look sad, and instead scowled.

If one was to be angry, a proper reason was necessary. Fenesis probably found a place she belonged to.

"Always the same contents, and that bores me. Let's check on Irine's pile for a change of pace."

Kusla said, and went to the library by the side.

The library here was similar in structure to the adjourning one, but felt cold as no one was there.

There was a work table surrounded by bulky bookshelves, a knife used to cut parchment, nails to fasten the parchments, weights, pen and ruler-like items. It seemed that unlike the sealed library, there were people who often frequented the place.

It was unknown if the original owner became a prisoner underground, escaped, or died. In any case, no matter the past glories, such was reduced to the bottom, like gold to lead.

Kusla felt the quill pen with his fingertips, looking down at the parchment scrolls on the work desk. There was a large pile of them on the floor, but only these few were on the table; surely these were the ones Irine was interested in.

Flipping through, he found parchments of picture scrolls that were interlinked.

"Hmph...a dragon here too..."

There depicted the story of the people in the town fighting against a dragon, with the dragon breathing fire and the people scampering. There was a little prose written in local language, but Kusla could understand as it was not a different language to understand.

"Calamity...end of the world..."

He opened the scrolls, and read on, somewhat taken aback.

The number of dragons increased, yet appearing before the dragons were not scampering people, but armies.

"The flames that cannot be wiped out...the flames of Hell..."

The people on the scrolls had no expression, looking up to the sky while being on fire; truly that was a terrifying sight.

The dragons were strangle uniform in size, forming rows.

It was as though there was a great war between the dragon armies and the human armies.

Did dragons really exist in such a place?

Kusla immediately denied such a notion; utterly ridiculous, he curled his lips into a smile.

Then, there was a loud thud from the back. Kusla reached his hand for the dagger by his waist, and turned around.

"Hiii!"

He could hear a little shriek, and found it was Fenesis.

"...What, it's you?"

Kusla sheathed the dagger he was about to draw. Fenesis remained utterly rattled, and with a stoic look, Kusla looked down at her.

"Is the work done?"

"N-not yet..."

Fenesis shrivelled up as she said this, but turned to look at the parchments behind Kusla.

Kusla recalled that Fenesis seemed fascinated with fables and the lot. When Weyland gave her a book containing such, she showed much elation.

However, Kusla had the urge to tease her upon seeing how she was being all gleeful before it. Thus he said, "No time for games now."

Such words left Fenesis' dazzling curious emerald eyes with their luster robbed.

```
She lowered her shoulders dejectedly.

"Get back to work now—"

"I-I am having a rest."

"Ah?"

Fenesis looked up.

"Y-you said that I should rest when necessary."
```

Truly he did. She insisted on what she wanted, using the promise granted to her; not a bad thing it was though.

Kusla stared at Fenesis intently, and she was rendered breathless.

With a monotonous tone, he said,

"Are you really tired?"

Fenesis was an honest one, and the ears under the veil twitched in agony.

It seemed she came to the conclusion that she could not lie, and the moment she was about to speak up.

```
"Just joking."

"Erm, eh?"
```

u n

"Looking at how restless you are, I will be bothered if you copied the wrong words."

```
"E-erm..."

"If you don't want to, get back to work."

"Yes!"
```

Fenesis answered with a smile.

Then, Kusla and Fenesis sat side by side, looking at the picture scrolls. Not to say they were on good terms, but they had to do so to look at the scrolls.

However, Kusla was thoroughly captivated by Fenesis' innocent look as she stared at the scrolls intently.

If he had fondled her buttocks and pinched her ears beneath the veil while she was concentrating, surely she would show a humorous reaction to see the least. Kusla was surprised to realize he had such notions. However, once he noticed the stunned look on Fenesis' face, he turned to look at the scrolls.

The batch of parchments linked together, forming a story. It was exceptionally long, like a series of stories woven upon a tapestry, such that there was no way to show them all if the room was not large enough.

Fenesis was looking at the last picture on the scrolls, which showed an unexpected thing.

"...Dragons, from a lake?"

Fire-breathing dragons rose up the pitch black lake, and countless burnt corpses were scattered forlornly around the lake.

That was the lake of Calamity, linked to the underground.

"What is this implying?"

Many stories contained hidden meanings behind them, based on reality. The fable of the Golden sheep was born out of the method of frisking gold using sheepskin.

Also, Kusla notified the end of this strange scroll.

It seemed to have been severed midway through.

There seemed to be a few more, but there were no further drawings, and it gave the impression of the artist stopping midway through.

"Is it just me?"

Kusla muttered, and at the same moment, there was the sound of a building door being slammed aside.

"Don't leave my side."

Kusla grabbed Fenesis by the shoulder, and pulled her behind him.

He drew the dagger with a reverse grip, and looked at the entrance. It would

not be surprising to see some yearning for revenge hide in the town after a war. Some of them might escape here after evading detection from the Knights' soldiers.

But what were the guards outside doing?

Fleeting footsteps echoed as their owner head towards this library.

And then,

"Huh?"

Headed past the library Kusla and Fenesis was in was Irine.

"What?"

Kusla did not sheath his dagger, for Irine might have been pursued by a hoodlum.

But his worries immediately dissipated. In the neighboring library, a ruffling sound could be heard.

Kusla peered over, and found Irine, her hair messy, taking a waxed wooden block for writing, and stacking on the books that were on the table.

"Done!" she then muttered, and carried those books at once.

"Hey thief, that's quite bold of you."

"Heh? Ah, sh-shut up. Mo-move aside! Weyland will get angry."

"For Weyland?"

Kusla asked, and at that moment, he noticed Irine's face covered in soot.

It seemed they had already started the furnace in a workshop while looking for it. Weyland probably had Irine bring over the records, intending to experiment.

Irine was gruff towards Kusla, but after meeting Fenesis in the eyes, she stopped in her tracks.

"Erm...to put it, I want to stay here to help, but that man will beat people up with pliers when mad, you know? Erm...so-sorry!"

Irine prattled on, and hastily left. It seemed she was too awkward to face

Fenesis.

She was more passionate than Weyland when it came to smithing, and it was likely smelting enthralled her more than sieving through the scrolls. Weyland might have brought irine along not because he sought authority over the workshop, but that he simply wanted to experiment. This however would simply be a hypothesis.

"..."

Fenesis watched Irine leave, looking stunned.

Certainly, given the definition of living however one liked, Irine was more suited for an alchemist workshop than a blacksmith's.

Kusla sighed in this library that had somewhat calmed down.

"Shall we have a rest too?"

Fenesis turned back to look at Kusla, her innocent eyes twirling about as she tilted her head in confusion.

"I'm interested in this dragon fable too. Want to check out the mineral veins?"

"|"

The beast ears beneath Fenesis' veil prick.

"Ca-can we?"

She always said the future was bright, yet when fortune was about to befall upon her, she wanted to doubt.

"If you don't want to, do you want to continue working?"

Kusla maintained a stoic look as he stated coldly. Fenesis immediately shrank back, pouting.

She then grumbled,

"Do-do not...make fun of me."

I don't want to stop when you're showing such a face.

Naturally, Kusla did not say these words, instead, he said, "put on your coat

and follow me".

The town was lively.

It was likely that it was simply due to the majority of the Azami's Crest entering the town, resulting in a population surge. Most importantly, there seemed to be a group of people hastily preparing for a feast. One could see heaps of food and wine at the plaza; Kusla was left impressed that they actually did it.

"Looks like it will be a noisy night."

"Might be better if we cannot sleep."

Fenesis noted with a serious look, and Kusla in turn shrugged and answered. They were headed north of the town, asked the Knights who had searched this town, and learned of the location depicted in the books. There were still signs of the mines when the town was first designated as a mining town and harvested.

What were originally mines had become hills, surrounded within the walls.

It was said that at the northernmost area of the hill, there was a sacred chapel.

"What if a dragon rises?"

"..."

Though she knew it was a joke, Fenesis' face froze up. She was susceptible into believing others, gullible, but she probably assumed a dragon really existed.

Such innocence left Kusla slightly speechless, but a part of him wished that there was really a dragon. He abhorred the mundane everyday life, and earnestly yearned for an unseen world beyond the tall hills.

If the burning lake truly exist, that there was really the fabled dragon existing, this sword of Orichalcum might really exist. He harbored such impish thoughts.

Thus, neither of them spoke up as they silently headed north.

The mine was reduced to hills due to mining, but there remained some height

and slope.

Simply scaling the stone steps to the hilltop chapel was taxing, and by the time he was done, Kusla was sweating all over, panting.

"A consequence of lack of sleep after a long trip."

He grumbled, and turned towards Fenesis who had fallen behind him. At that moment, he looked afar. Fenesis finally managed to climb up the stone steps after Kusla, her hands on her knees as she panted, only to notice Kusla's strange reaction. She was taken aback, and turned to the back.

Over there, the breeze blew.

"Not a bad scene here."

The mutter quickly dissipated amidst the winds.

A vast expanse was laid out before their eyes.

"And I thought Gulbetty was impressive."

Looking down from atop was a privilege only the kings standing at the top of a tower or fortress could have. Even without the reasoning of abstruse theology coercing people, this alone would be enough for anyone to understand why God would in the skies.

"Hey, what are you two doing?"

Kusla lost all appetite to ponder, and simply yearned to look at the scenery when this voice called out to them.

Looking back, there was a soldier giving a strange look.

"Hmm...an alchemist, and a sister?"

"Under Archduke Kratal's command."

"Ahh, new fellows in this town?"

Kusla nodded, and Fenesis went to his side, somewhat uneasy.

"Here to repent as you look at the fine scenery?"

"We heard of a pagan painting inside the chapel, and want to be sure. Also, this one here is the assistant."

"Heh?"

The soldier sized up Fenesis without restraint, and the latter glared back in fury.

"Here's a guarantee. If there is anything the matter, talk to Archduke Kratal."

"Nn, no. It's nothing at all. No treasures inside."

"Is that so? And to think I brought a monk's bag along."

Kusla said as he shook the bag slung over his shoulder; the soldier heartily guffawed.

"We're just on guard here in case anyone suspicious escapes inside."

"Or that there will be people coming out?"

Kusla joked, and Fenesis was taken aback.

"Hahaha, there are such worries too. There's only one path inside, and the complicated passages have been sealed up carefully. A cave leading out of the town is a double-edged sword after all. The people in town were worried about being attacked, and already sealed it a long time ago."

It was common to have secret passages linking into and out of the town.

Ancient mining relics would certainly have tunnels more complicated than an ant's hive. Kusla was daunted thinking of how much effort it was to bury them.

"Well, be sure not to be corrupted by infidels."

The soldier said, and returned to his co-worker who was napping by the chapel.

The peaceful times after a war.

Kusla simply raised an eyebrow, and said.

"Let's go."

Fenesis nodded.

Kusla had assumed the passage within would be akin to a tunnel as often described, but that was not the case. Everything within was chiselled out of stone, from beneath the feet, to the walls, and the ceiling. Honestly put, it

seemed like an underground sewer of a city.

The footsteps echoed intriguingly, and Fenesis seemed a little exultant.

After descending a few flights of steps, they arrived at a gutter where underground water was being drained, the design so fantastic it left Kusla marvelling. Working at the mines was a battle against water, and the drainage facilities showed a glimpse of the technical skills the town had.

They continued walking, and on the way through, passed by some ditches that could be mistaken for different passages. Some of them had little altars, with wilted flowers and wind-weathered food offerings atop them. It was likely people came here to pray for victory when the fighting was going on.

Kusla had such thoughts as he walked on, and suddenly—

The scenery before his eyes attracted his attention.

"A light?"

It was not the light of a flame, but the light of the sun.

A light shone in from around the corner before him.

"Phosphorus light? No...daylight...?"

But it's the underground. Kusla was speechless.

The land of pagans, a miracle unbeknownst.

Kusla's heart sizzled, and he hastened his steps. He probably had a premonition rising within him. Alchemists in particular were a bunch of daydreamers. For them, if they had the time to spend entire days praying for the success of their experiments, they would use that time to experiment; however, it was not to say that they were not attracted by sacred items. Rather, it was because they were lured by the hidden mysteries on the world that they became alchemists.

Thus, at that moment, Kusla dropped the torch in his hand.

Such was the overwhelming presence of the scenery before him.

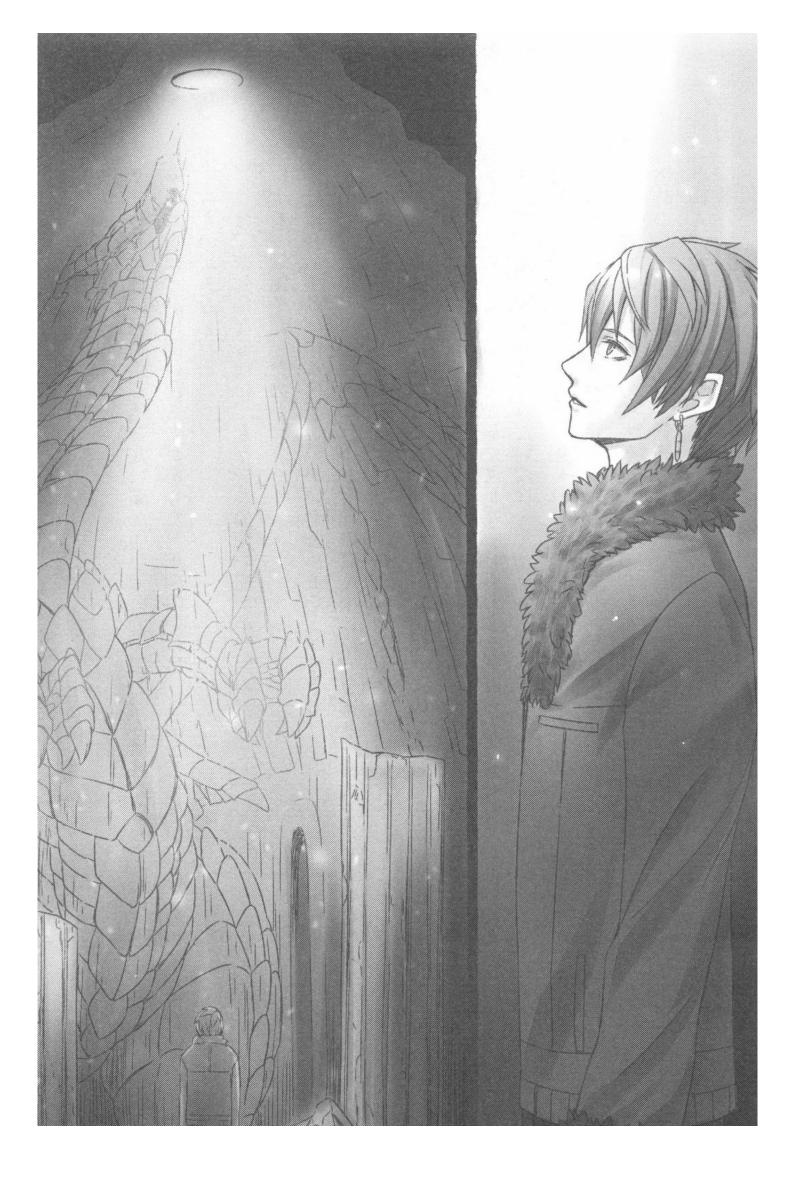
"...An underground, chapel..."

Passing through the passage, there was a large space before them. The ceiling

was domed, a hole in the apex as the sunlight shone through it, as though connected to the skies.

But most amazing of all was 'that scene'.

Looking forward down the passage, there was a massive altar before them, with a stunningly massive dragon sculpture behind that altar. So humongous it was that the dragon head looking up reached the center of the ceiling.



In other words, the face of the dragon had reached the hole the sunlight shone in, its mouth opened as it looked up.

Kusla once heard that once a mine lost its value as a mine, the interior would be reused again.

Before this place became an altar, it served another purpose.

"A giant furnace?"

The higher the flames, the fierier it got.

Thus, when carrying out mass scale refining, people would dig a vertical hole in the middle of the hill, link it to a horizontal one, and insert the furnace. Considering the costs, it was atypical to have such a massive hole.

However, this was the mine they profited from, and thus they had no such restrictions.

Kusla looked up at the ceiling, all stunned, his feet stumbling forward as he arrived at the bottom of the hole, and narrowed his eyes. The hole at the top was tall, the inside pitch black. Perhaps it was charred black.

"This is just like a dragon breathing fire..."

Initially, this place was dug up as an ordinary mine, and a huge hole was dug up. Once its mission as a mine was finished, it was the place to refine the minerals transported from neighboring mines, and when its mission as a furnace ended, it was rebuilt as a chapel. The dragon sculpture made was surely to present the fear of those massive flames back in the old days.

As he imagined what happened back then, Kusla was throbbing with excitement.

"So the murals are all dragons?"

Kusla looked down, and stared.

"Hey, the paintings you wanted to see—"

Kusla called out to Fenesis, only to stop.

Fenesis remained rooted as she continued to carry the heavy baggage of books.

There was a mural before her eyes. That mural was eerily similar to the paintains she saw. It was likely those paintings were drawn by someone who had witnessed these paintings.

However, why did this mural in particular attract Fenesis' attention?

Kusla approached her, completely mystified, and at that moment, he realized this.

"The fire breathing dragon and the warriors wielding their shields..."

Typically, such a scene would be the exhilarating climax of an Epic, but the mural here seemed exceptionally leisurely. There were people standing behind the dragon, and they did not seem to be soldiers. Such a scenery seemed to depict humans leisurely spectating warriors fighting the evil dragon, and clearly did not resemble a skirmish to counter the assault of the big dragon.

Upon a closer look, Kusla finally understood why Fenesis was lured to this mural. Such was the dragon story a boy would love to dream of.

But Fenesis was looking at something beyond the dragon.

"They are—"

He went by her, approached the mural, and stared intently.

The murals were weathered after many years, but most of it could be identified clearly.

Amidst the people watching the dragon fight against the warriors, there were a strange few.

"Your people?"

Kusla asked Fenesis, who was next to him.

Only upon his words did Fenesis realize Kusla's existence.

And so the tears in her eyes fell, and she realized she was weeping.

"I...do not know."

Fenesis feebly answered.

After seeing such a massive painting however, Kusla could tell. Fenesis was

probably thinking after looking at the illustrations on that book, if she was one of them. There were a few onlookers with non-human characteristics.

They had non-human ears, dressed in unique clothing reminiscent of the desert regions.

"There are many legends of wanderers spreading the culture and skills from faraway lands. So the ones who came to spread these smithing skills five hundred years ago...were them?"

Kusla feebly muttered, his mind beckoned to the faraway plane of time.

Cultures differed from the feathers of a Dandelion, for they would not spread with the wind; certainly there was a need to ingrain them in the minds, or to go around spreading them everywhere, "I see..."

Kusla kept looking at the mural before his eyes, and at the same time, wondered.

"There are more inside. Shall we go take a look?"

Kusla asked, and returned to pick up the dropped torch.

I don't have a fire, so he thought, but Fenesis went over, and suddenly knelt down.

"Here is a fire."

Saying that, she took out a flint and some dried grass from her monk bag."

"You brought them along?"

Kusla asked, somewhat impressed by her. Fenesis bashfully shook her head.

"Just forgot to bring it out."

So admirable she was, yet so humble when praised.

Fenesis flickered the fire, lit the grass, and then the candle.

"Let's go look for treasures."

Kusla joked, and Fenesis gave the look of someone who had bawled out, only to smile elatedly thereafter.

The chapel was reminiscent of the core of a large furnace space, and

countless passages extended everywhere in a radial manner.

The passages were no long, but each of them had murals depicted, along with places where dragon statues were had. As expected, Fenesis was not interested in the dragon itself, but was staring intently at the people on the murals, trying to fill something in her heart. Kusla had no intention to disturb her, and all he could help with was to look for records relating to those people.

The chapel might contain book records harking back to fables when the town started. Many times, the history of the towns would be passed down as superstition, so Kusla was looking for the storage room for ceremonial tools, finding it at the end of a passage. One could imagine from the soldier's haphazard reactions that it had been ransacked.

"Terrible."

One could understand from the scene before them that religion and authority were worthless in times of emergencies.

Surely the citizens of this town would be terrified of this place, and treated this as an important place as they prayed, viewing ceremonial tools as sacred items. However, these ceremonial cups and plates made of cheap tin were treated accordingly to their values. And clearly there was no sign of divine punishment on those soldiers keeping watch on the outside.

"Hmph."

Kusla snorted as he picked up some of the trampled items that were in relatively good condition. It seemed those soldiers were only interested in valuables, for the aged parchments were left behind, a miracle at that. It seemed those were the shorthands written by the local clergymen for preaching, stating the order of worshop, the verses to recite every time; so similar it was to the worship by the Orthodox. On a closer look, Kusla found that the prayers seemed to be hailing the history of this town, and found that sort of thing to be more valuable.

"At the dawn of time, the dragon awoke from the lake of death, the flames it spewed incinerated everything, and this land was left with silence..."

Truly it was a religion befitting a cold, gloomy country that spent half the year

under lead-colored clouds.

Surely anyone would be downhearted to hear narration of the world every service.

"The respect for God is like the wind. Once the respect is misdirected, the eternal burning flames will befall..."

This religion seemed a lot harsher than the Orthodox.

Kusla flipped through the parchments, and then spotted a fable written in newer ink.

"As time transpires, humans will become weaker. The knowledge from foreign lands shall cause humans to fall; thou shall not neglect on the worship of the dragon god, lest the eternal flames shall rob us all..."

It was common to have a modicum of respect to God, this was akin to fear.

That certainly seemed the case as he recalled what he had witnessed on the picture scrolls in the archives.

"Nothing else?"

If possible, it would be for the best if there were fables about the origins of this town, especially those wanderers. They were dressed in outstanding manners, their profiles shown on the murals, and thus, Kusla assumed there should be some related records.

Perhaps in the past, existences like them were not that uncommon.

"...?"

Kusla then noticed some crude candle altars, water flasks, and a black book by a toppled rack. He bent down, wanting to pick it up, only to see a hole in the wall, level with his eyes.

The toppled rack was probably leaning by the wall, and it was similar to a trapdoor. This hole was built from a brick taken out from this stone wall. Someone devoted probably went about hitting the wall, determined through sound, and found this hollow.

Kusla knelt down, trying to find what was inside. He peeked into the hole that

was as tall as his knees, but naturally, it was empty.

"...No, there seems to be something written...what is it?"

Kusla dusted away the hole, brought the candle over, and stared intently.

"The flames of hell shall devour those that pilfer this..."

Hidden here were probably the golden replicas of the dragon.

Kusla let out a little sigh, picked up the black book, and stood up.

He, who lived for the sake of knowledge, was immediately peeved upon seeing a book abandoned so casually.

It was a thin book, with a terrifying black on the cover, trampled all over with footprints, which Kusla had pity for.

The title written on the book was called,

"The Book of Dragon Blood."

That's it. Kusla chuckled.

The book stated that dragon blood could give eternal life, and people who fell into the lake of dragon blood could escape thirty years later out of coincidence, maintaining the appearance they had thirty years before. When dragon blood was alit, the flames would continue to burn, such that even water would be unable to extinguish. If a dragon was hurt, the burned dragon blood would scatter, bringing calamity to humanity, and so on.

All these bombastic words for the sake of befuddling the foolish citizens.

"However, the book does state this land is rich in minerals as they're fossilized by fragments of dragon scales..."

They feared the dragon, and yet at the same time, respected it. Kusla was a little fascinated, elated to realize humans really had quite a variety of thoughts.

"Using dragon blood...in pinches, elixirs can be made, and if not, a youth of eternal youth. Dragon blood can ignite the flames of eternity that can never be extinguished, even with water. Do not forget to fear the dragon, and its blood shall bring various benefits to us."

After that, there were all the usual religious narrations. He continued to flip

through the pages, and suddenly noticed a line he was particularly curious about.

"Want...to revive a dragon?"

Revive a dragon?

Kusla suddenly lifted his head, and turned back to look at the chapel.

Naturally, it was impossible to see from this angle.

But there was a massive dragon statue that symbolized a smelting furnace.

And that statue seemed to confidently declare that there was once a dragon here. At that moment, Kusla nearly believed in the text.

"...Preposterous."

However, dragons do not exist.

Unlike an anomaly like Fenesis, dragons simply belonged to fairy tales.

Kusla however kept the book in his hag, and intended to read the rest whenever he was free.

Soon after, the duo left the room full of ceremonial tools, passed through the passages, and returned to the chapel. The sunlight shining through the ceiling had weakened greatly, unable to reach below the hole, for the sun might be setting. Clearly they had spent quite some time loitering around.

In the dim chapel, Fenesis lifted her head towards the massive dragon statue.

"Had enough of looking?"

Naturally, Fenesis had noticed Kusla, and was was taken aback as she lowered her sight.

"Your expression says enough."

Kusla let out a wry smile.

She looked refreshed, as though she had taken a bath.

"The Ancients do have an open mind after all."

There were probably others with deformities depicted in the paintings. To Fenesis, who had been persecuted, her relatives slaughtered, those paintings

were a miracle.

"The Ancients?"

Hearing this question from Kusla, who had taken her in, Fenesis giggled. She probably intended to say that.

"You are a horrible person."

She said with a chuckle.

Kusla did his best to maintain a stoic façade, saying,

"Let's go back."

Kusla held the torch, and Fenesis hastily followed from behind.

She's clinging onto me closer than usual, so Kusla thought gleefully. At this moment, Fenesis whispered.

"Thank you for bringing me along."

Kusla did not speak up, and merely shrugged in response.

The sun in the North set early, and it was already pitch dark by the time they arrived outside. The guards were no longer present, and not due to a change of duty shift. That reason was immediately spotted.

Kusla stopped in his tracks, looking down at the town beneath the stone steps.

"Heh."

"Woah..."

Kusla let out a little cry, and Fenesis was left amazed.

"Just as the way you said you like it."

"Eh?"

"There is more luck than we can imagine."

Looking across the horizon, the town below was lit everywhere, bustling.

It was bright from the plaza in the center of the town down to the narrow roads everywhere else, such that one could see the people's faces. The plaza

resembled a furnace, and the molten metal in the plaza appeared to flow down the streets.

"We're going to open a workshop in this town. Hills of discoveries await us."
"..."

Fenesis slowly looked up at Kusla, and then looked down at the town beneath them.

"I have no idea if you are being pessimistic or optimistic."

"Just being a little cautious."

Upon hearing his response, she giggled.

"Then, I have something I wish to cautiously ask you."

"Hm?"

Kusla lowered his head at Fenesis, whose sidelong face seemed strangely mature.

"I do feel it is fine to be in this town...is this foolish of me to assume?"

Kusla did not ask what she meant.

Ever since she was born, Fenesis had been reviled and persecuted. Even though she finally made it to the workshop Kusla and the others were at, and found a momentarily shelter for her. For the time being, she was just a little rookie, but if this town did welcome people like her, if this history was fact...

Fenesis looked down at the town, appearing to be on the verge of tears. To Kusla, her expression was precious, probably rarer than Damascus steel.

Elation, hope, so much that she was on the verge of tears.

Kusla scratched his head.

He had yet to process such a delicate piece of glass work, and for a moment, did not know how to respond.

"Stop whimpering."

And in the end, such crude words were all he could only eke out.

Fenesis' eyes twitched, and the hot tears immediately fell.

The lamps on the streets reflected the damp green eyes, forming a resemblance to an art piece of gold and emerald.

"I am, not crying."

Saying that, she wept with a smile.

Kusla sighed, and patted Fenesis on the head. She did not resist, and instead leaned in Kusla's lap, probably as Kusla had pulled her in. In any case, she did not resist, and neither did he push her away.

While he embraced her somewhat forcefully, she let out a cat-like whimper, the voice vague.

A little time certain transpired, yet it seemed an eternity. Before he spoke up, Kusla gave a little cough out of habit.

```
"Anyway, let's go test our luck."

"Hm?"

"Dinner. It's a feast. Surely we'll have some really nice things to eat."

"Ah..."
```

Fenesis responded, and soon after, her stomach began to growl. She had toiled till this time without having a lunch, and it was to be expected that she would be hungry. She shrank, back, and even in the darkness, it was obvious she was blushing.

'Let's go."

Kusla descended the stairs, and Fenesis followed him.

As they descended, Kusla was holding Fenesis by the hand, probably because she was wobbly in her feet.

Though he felt it would ruin the impression of an alchemist who would terrorize crying children into silence, he did not let go. It was probably due to him noticing Fenesis looking down at the steps and descending tentatively. Or perhaps it was the warmth in his palm as that little hand was holding his so unexpectedly firmly.

Kusla looked over at the outside of the wall, the horizon intersecting with the

night sky. Luck was in more abundance than he assumed. Perhaps that might truly be the case. Looking up at the night sky, Kusla showed a little cresent smile on his face. "E-erm." "Huh?" Kusla looked down, and found Fenesis pouted.

"D-do not make fun of me."

""

Only after a while did Kusla realize what Fenesis had meant. It seemed she had mistaken Kusla for mocking her being so tentative descending the stairs.

"I did say before, did I not?" "Hm?"

"I have no interest in you."

Fenesis puffed her cheeks, and turned her face aside angry. However, she did not let go.

Kusla sneered, at himself in this regard, that more than Fenesis' fear of the stairs, he was more concerned about his own fear of the stairs of happiness.

Truly he had become unbefitting of the moniker 'Interest'.

He had such a joke in mind, and then,

"Ah, they're here!"

A familiar voice rang, and looking over, he found Irine and Weyland at the bottom of the stairs.

They were holding mugs of wine, and Irine also had a skewer of meat in hand.

"See, didn't I say so~?"

"You never said they would be holding hands. My guess is on point. A tie."

Both of them said to each other.

Only then did Fenesis realize that she was intimately holding Kusla's hand before Irine and Weyland. She frantically let go, and Kusla in turn exerted more strength into his grip to tease her.

"Did you find a fine workshop?"

"Sure did~?"

Weyland said, and glanced aside at Fenesis who was trying her best to escape, sneering away. Irine smacked Weyland on the shoulder, but even she could not help but chuckle.

Kusla lowered his head at Fenesis, and shrugged.

"We're comrades, right?"

"…"

Fenesis looked up with a teary face, growling,

"Not at all!"

Kusla leered, and looked over at Weyland.

"Since we're drinking, let's get down to the new workshop."

"Eh? You're saying that now, Kusla? That's unlike you~"

"You want to drink at such a noisy place?"

Kusla raised his chin, and a group of mercenaries before them, causing a ruckus in a circle. It seemed they were already partying since day, and looking at how things stood, it probably would not end even in at midnight.

"Well true....but I don't really mind~"

He looked over at Irine.

"Eh? I want to dance at the plaza."

"Dance before the furnace. I'll watch~"

"No, way."

Irine emphasized, and looked over at Fenesis.

"What about you, UI?"

Fenesis widened her eyes, not having expected anyone else to seek her view.

Perhaps she too was engulfed in the atmosphere formed by the soldiers, merchants, and the craftsmen who had came a long way.

Kusla gently let go of her hand, and she recovered, looking up at him.

"What do you want to do?"

She wanted to let go so much, but once she did, she looked strangely uneasy.

It was probably down to the fact that she had bade farewell with many over the course of this journey.

And thus, to bury this lonely, she blindly desired to hold someone else's hand.

After much ado, she finally held Kusla's hand.

Welcome to the world of alchemists.

She slowly lifted her head.

"The workshop will do."

For that would be her new home."

"I see."

"Well, since the Princess desired so, guess we got no choice here"

"Wait, I'm not the princess?"

An agitated Irine harassed Weyland, scaring him with the tip of the skewer.

Seeing how everyone started to take action because of her opinion, Fenesis was a little lost.

Kusla was about to follow after Weyland and Irine, and suddenly turned back to Irine, saying, "You can't walk without me holding your hand?"

The ears under her veil twitched.

"I-I can walk by myself!"

Saying that, she quickly made haste after them.

The streets were lined with stalls of meals and wine; Irine and Weyland led the way as they went straight to the craftsmen's street. They arrived at a stone workshop, one so magnificent even a greedy alchemist would be left intimidated by.

"Welcome to the new world!"

Saying that, Kusla reached his hand out to push aside the door leading to the new workshop.

Act 3

The feast itself was intended to calm the people, but this overnight ruckus certainly was rowdy.

Sounds of wine being toppled, laughter, singing voices echoes endlessly.

Kusla and the others went to bed early, partially due to fatigue overwhelming them, and also as they had heaps of work to do the following day.

Kusla did not drink much, and on the next day, he returned to the guild house and ransacked the archives. In unrelated matters, there were dozens collapses at the plaza opposite the guild house, as Kusla had expected, and even the guards on watch were drunk. If Irine were to dance away there, another corpse would have been likely.

Only Kusla and Fenesis went to the guild house, for Weyland and Irine grumbled that they could only read before the furnace in the workshop, and remained there. And for Irine, who was illiterate, she had read through all the picture scrolls in the archives, and had nothing to do even if she did head there.

Kusla rummaged through the archives for precious information, while Fenesis kept copying the useful.

She had consumed meat the previous night, a rarity at that, and she had some wine, so she had collapsed early, and seemed to slept for quite some time. In fact, she was toiling away reliably.

Soon after, it was noon, and when Kusla asked Fenesis out for a stroll at the marketplace, he was inquired: Can we eat in the workshop?

She probably wished to be in her new home a little longer. Kusla too wanted to see the furnace of the new workshop, and did not oppose. They took a few books, and left the archives.

That alone would have been fine, but Kusla had forgotten something obvious. Since he had to buy lunch, he had to carry it back. He bought some bread and cheese, a pot to boil soup with the chicken left over from the previous day. Only

then did he realize his folly.

"How unbecoming of me..."

"Eh?"



Fenesis was holding notes for use at the workshop in both hands.

Kusla had book stored in monk bags slung over his shoulders, food in both hands, and weakly chimed in, "I am an alchemists. Now I have food in both hands for lunch in the workshop, like I am toiling for my family. What has become of me?"

Fenesis was taken snack, and then she giggled.

"There is a stove in the workshop, so we have to hurry and prepare the pot, do we not?"

"...how redundant."

"Is that so? Ah, but we need to clean up before then. The workshop doesn't look like it has been in use for quite a while."

The bed on the previous day was simply the dirt floor, nary a blanket, so Kusla and the others spent the night at the inn. Irine could at least make her way to the inn, but fenesis had to be carried back by Kusla.

Such a scene was probably foolish to the bystanders.

"Leaving it to you then. You're at the age to play house."

"Muuuu..."

Fenesis scowled, but it was obvious she was not really annoyed.

And though Kusla had thoroughly derided himself, such ineptitude did not seem so bad after all, so he let it slide.

Just relax, huh?

Kusla recalled what Fenesis had said to him.

"We bought lunch-"

Fenesis opens the door as she said this, only to stop midway through.

What? Kusla entered a tad later, wondering what was going on.

"How impressive."

The workshop was nice and clean.

"Hm? No fire in the furnace?"

Just as she had been doing in the blacksmith guild of Gulbetty, Irine had the workshop nice and tidy. Though that itself was not a malady, Kusla was a little taken snack, having assumed she would be smelting with Weyland.

"Ah, Well, the Knights came by soon after you left."

"The Knights?"

"Yes. The trade routes have yet to be established, so we are not supposed to waste fuel unnecessarily"

"Ahh."

This was the land of the pagans, fat from the spider web-like information and resource network the Knights had established. Even after having conquered the biggest town, it would take some time until try could establish contact from here to the South.

"So Weyland just went to sleep?"

Kusla looked over at a corner of the workshop, and found Weyland sleeping atop the hay that should be wrapped in charcoal, sleeping away like a beggar.

He's able to sleep while the one next to him is working. Kusla was a little amazed by this.

"Shut up already"

"Food."

"Fuahhh..."

Weyland was typically lethargic except when it came to working in front of the furnace.

Kusla laid out the lunch onto the work table Irine had cleaned up, and the four of them sat on the chairs.

Suddenly bursting into a fit of laughter was Irine.

"Haha. This feels like a workshop."

"It's the real deal~"

"This isn't what I meant."

Kusla understood very well what Irine was saying.

And as he knew, he turned to look at Fenesis.

"Now then, let us give thanks to God, and begin."

Goodness, this really was an indecent meal.

After lunch, Kusla focused on reading the books he had obtained, while Fenesis continued to write.

Irine probably did not have much work left to do, so she took a mop and pail and went around the workshop. In a matter of moments, the remaining work was done, and only then did she return to the workplace. You sure have it tough, Kusla thought in his heart. However, he had a feeling irine aas being restless for some reason. She was pacing around in the workplace, fiddling around with the racks from time to time, and at other times toying with the tools placed up on them.

However, she soon got bored, and folded her arms before the unlit furnace, groaning add she stood there.

Then, having appeared to have made up her mind, she turned around.

"Hey."

Kusla intended to ignore her, but upon noticing how she was bored to tears, he raised an eyebrow, and asked.

"What?"

Kusla had already known what Irine was getting at, and the latter reclined her head as she said, "There has to be something I can do, right?"

Kusla scanned the surroundings, and was left somewhat impressed as he saw the tidied workshop, "How about mending some clothes? This fellow here should have some work clothes."

Kusla pointed at Fenesis, whose green eyes twirled as she tiled her neck in confusion.

"Mended during the trip."

```
"Now that's too bad. A blacksmith is useless if fuel can't be used."
  "Ugh..."
  Irine winced in agony. She probably could not deal with idleness.
  Kusla then called out to Weyland, who was lying around in a corner of the
room.
 "Hey Weyland!"
  ""
 Weyland did not answer, but it was obvious he was just lying around and not
sleeping.
  "Weyland!"
  "...what~"
  "This Princess Irine here is bored to death. Accompany her for a moment."
  "Uuu?"
 Weyland got up slowly.
  "Make this princess happy with the woman skills you're proud of."
  "...Isn't It you who said not to do anything to her to avoid trouble, Kusla~?"
  "Got to look the time and moment."
  "Ugh...i seem to have a preference for older ones recently"
  "H-hey! What are you saying now?"
  Of course, that was a joke.
  Kusla shrugged, and Weyland stood up, looking reluctant to work.
  "Ah, you don't have to stand up."
  Irine refused in a panicky manner, but her courtesy left Weyland delighted.
  "Now then, where shall we go today?"
  Weyland muttered, but Irine suddenly spoke up.
  "H-hey, actually, I have a request."
```

```
"Ah?"

Irine looked across at Kusla, Weyland and Fenesis, stating timidly.

"What, a request? Want me to spend more time with you?"

"Ehh? No way~?"

"No!"

Irine gritted her teeth as she hollered back, and then she said,

"I hope you can teach me how to read..."
```

Can I not?

Irine's eyes went up towards the trio, such an expression from her from truly a little rare.

Kusla shot Weyland a look, who pondered, and stretched his back.

"Phuahhh...haven't slept enough. Let's sleep some more."

"Hey!"

"Nap time."

Saying that, he took the hay and went into the room. The effort it would take for Weyland to bring Irine around would be about the same as teaching her how to read, the crucial factor being Weyland's mood.

Kusla sighed, and looked over at Irine. It seemed she had decided to make this request after much deliberation, yet such an unbecoming outcome happened, and she felt she did not being. This was similar to fenesis feeling hurt for lacking in smelting skills compared to the others.

He sighed again, and said to Irine,

"Get a candle and a wooden block."

A common practice for penmanship was to apply wax on wood and write on it.

Irine lifted her head, nodded away seriously, and got down to preparation immediately.

How do breach Irine how to read? Kusla wondered. Irine wanted to be of immediate gel, so he should be teaching her some recent useable things.

Words has shape and sound, and by combining these, the intent will be conveyed. However, it would be arduous to teach from the beginning. Irine was a thoroughbred blacksmith, and practicality should be the aim.

To have her learn from what she saw would be the most effective method, in other words, to have her learn the terms mixed in those pictures scrolls.

Truly, there were not many terms for Irine to learn through this, and she was intelligent enough to be able to see a water-powered bellow, grasp it's mechanism, and rebuild it, so she should be fine on that regards. After that, all he needed to do was to teach her some simple terms like mineral types or fire control recorded on the scrolls.

Typically, blacksmiths would not hand down their skills through language.

"These are the names of the minerals, at least. Even I have some pronunciation issues with them."

"It's helpful that they are almost to the words I know...i guess?"

Irine could distinguish between gold and silver with her eyes closed, just by touching them. She was tentative at first, but she did try to read the words forcefully.

It appeared she had learned of the minerals terms in the Southern language.

Though this was the Northern land of the pagans, it was next to the South, thus there was no decisive difference in the words of the two lands.

She probably could remember if she put in some effort.

"And these too?"

"These are usually used in those common paragraphs. Repent and the door will be owned to you, or something like that, you understand? If you can remember, you can use them for various situations."

"I see..."

Some of the picture scrolls depicted the situation in the workshops, but most

of them would have much in common with a normal sermon. For example, lazy masters, arrogant masters who treated their disciples as slaves, those would series local customers would receive retribution, a live demonstration on how to use a strangely shaped below from the South, and so on.

Amidst such scenes, short paragraphs containing the usual sentences would normally be introduced.

If one could not understand the words he might assume the passage would be conveying some highly exalted message; once the true intent was understand however, he might figure that the words were not that impressive. Such a scenario would not he limited to words alone.

"Well, try mesmerizing about a hundred or two hundred. Get these memorized, and those things on the picture scrolls while be easy to understand. If there's anything else you don't understand, you can ask me, or ask Weyland. He will still answer if you ask hill from time to time."

Irine gave Kusla a look, and nodded away somehow unwillingly. You're the one who asked me for help, but Kusla did not say that out. Her expression indicates that she was bemeaning herself for her incompetence.

```
"Just to ask."

"Huh?"

"Is it fine for me to ask a question?"
```

She has a passion for learning, one no inferior to Fenesis.

Kusla needed Irine to know some words, so he sat side by side with her, while Fenesis sat opposite her, citing away silently. To make something Irine would he superior to Fenesis, she would not pretend not to know if she did not, and ask whatever she wanted to ask.

```
"Sure. More ten willing to teach you."

"...Utter nonsense."

Though she said so, Irine let out a sigh of relief.

"What is written here?"
```

Saying that, she took up a writing block with some unintelligible handwriting.

It certainly had the vibe of a five year old child sketching on the ground with a wooden stick.

"Try practising your handwriting. This doesn't look like a girls words."

"I-it's fine, isn't it? I am a blacksmith to begin with!"

"Your husband's penmanship was really vigorous."

"Ugh..."

After silencing Irine, Kusla looked down at the piece of paper she handed over.

He was not joking in the slightest. The handwriting was atrocious, almost unintelligible. However, he could barely identify the words.

She probably copied this from the picture scrolls.

Kusla saw the words, and showed a smile.

"You too have some interest in weird things."

"...so It's this kind of thing?"

"...eternity...beginning...hell, he'll? This is a raid, no? All other...produce... ancient..."

He burst into laughter.

"An archmage."

Irine stared intently as Kusla read the note.

"Do you intend to be an alchemist?"

Kusla teased Irine, who suddenly lifted her head.

And his eyes quivered.

Kusla could not help but imagine which imagery Irine was captivated, that it surely had to be something very amazing. Those seeking such intriguing smelting methods in a blacksmith's workshop would be warned.

Yet he did not mock Irine for clearly faltering.

```
"But this isn't a bad thing."

"Uu...eh?"

"This isn't a blacksmith workshop. There's nothing to bind your sensibility."

"..."

"Go pursue what you like; the important thing is..."
```

With a stern look, Kusla continued,

"Never lose sight of your goals, and do not be stuck in a superstitious insistence. Throwing the bones of a Saint for smelting is already the limit; if you are so obsessed with the constellations or reciting chants when smelting, be careful. This is a different thing altogether."

Irine looked up and stared at Kusla intently, nodding away slowly.

In many ways, she was an outstanding blacksmith, but as she was thoroughly indoctrinated in the lifestyle of a blacksmith's workshop, she could only trust what she could see with the naked eye, and what could be replicated again.

I shouldn't worry about her too much. Kusla thought, but Irine spoke up,

```
"I say, you..."
```

"Ah? No, it's nothing."

Saying that, she snatched the paper back.

And then she bent her waist.

What? While Kusla was feeling sceptical, the red-haired girl lowered her head, and again handed the slip of paper to Kusla.

"I want you to write down what each term means."

This helper had a different hair color from Fenesis, yet certainly she had her own charms.

Kusla was a little curious to the painting that could intrigue Irine; nowhere in the other picture scrolls was there the term 'archmage'.

He wondered as he translated the words Irine identified from the note, and handed the paper to her. While Irine stared at it, Kusla suddenly noticed

Fenesis' stare from the other side. "What?" "|" Fenesis was taken aback when Kusla asked her, and shrivelled up. "You have things you don't understand, don't you?" "N-no..." She stammered away, and began copying again. Kusla glanced at her, feeling skeptical. What is wrong with her? She might be thinking that she could help in some way, but could not interrupt. Kusla too felt the same. "Hey, you, I'll have Fenesis teach you." "Eh?" Irine lifted her head, responded with a somewhat surprised tone, "Language-wise, she's more proficient than I am." Kusla was stating a fact, but Irine might have been really surprised by this. She was clearly giving a look of doubt. "Ah—erm. this means..." Irine looked back and forth between Fenesis and Kusla. What was she so doubtful about? Kusla was left bewildered, and his innate desire to prank was throbbing away unbeknownst to him. "Or do you wish for me to teach you?" He chuckled, and Irine's face froze as she stared at him. Uh oh, so Irine's face betrayed such an expression. And Kusla's smile froze. "Hey, I was just joking..."

"No-no-no-no, that's not it, you imbecile! Not like that—"

Irine peeked at Fenesis, trying to defend herself, only to end up acting weirder.

Fenesis gave Irine a blank look, and the latter could not help but stand up.

"You imbecile!"

Saying those words, Irine grabbed that piece of paper and stormed into the inner room.

Kusla and Fenesis were left behind, and were strangely silent.

Kusla looked at Fenesis.

"Your hand stopped."

"Eh, ah, y-yes."

Fenesis, who had been spacing out all this while, began to work frantically again.

Clearly she was being listless, but Kusla did not point it out.

It was a little late of him, but only then did he realize why that lecherous Weyland did not teach Irine how to read. Fenesis felt that she could be able to help irine out, and was not paying attention to the fact that Irine was interacting with Kusla. Surely that would not be an interesting notion; to simply put, it was probably down to jealousy.

This anxious vibe of a young lady left Kusla clicking his tongue.

A small numbing feeling deep within his mind, as though his hand was reaching towards an itch it could not touch.

Tensions would arise whenever young ladies were around.

The issue was that Kusla could not rectify the reason to this numbness, after everything else had left him rattle. However, he had other thoughts about this matter.

Once Irine gave a clumsy look, clearly showing that she had interest in Kusla, Fenesis was obviously rattled, and her blank look was truly charming. Kusla felt an itch in his heart, knowing that she was showing an immature possessive desire. Truly it was not a bad thing to be loved.

Every day was a numbingly peaceful day.

Kusla was left stunned, unable to grimace, for he sensed his burning desire for Magdala was healed by such a trivial matter, or perhaps this was all he sought. All this while, he went with the passion to 'strip even God naked', seeking the Truth to the world, yet he was so easily satisfied by such an ordinary matter. Was that simply all he sought?

Kusla assumed that was not the case, but he had no method to prove this.

If he had the chance to prove it, Kusla would be convicted that he would be able to perform the abilities of an alchemist.

Such was his conviction that he would not be ruined by the anxiety displayed by Fenesis and Irine.

Given that the Knights' rule over this land was as sturdy as monoliths, and he could live peaceful days under such protection, probably able to carry out lots and lots of research.

There was nothing inappropriate or unsatisfying.

But this might simply be all.

Thinking about this, Kusla suddenly felt a little forlorn.

In any case, even in this town of Kazan, there was no earth-shattering technology he desired to be found.

Just being liked by Fenesis, and being able to protect her is enough for me. Such a fact was basically telling him such an ordinary life was the Truth to the world.

The mundane, unchanging daily life would continue for eternity, only toyed with by occasional illogicality; such was his life.

Was that all to his life?

Kusla sat face to face with Fenesis, flipping through the 'precious knowledge' that seemed so familiar to him as he let his thoughts run wild.

There was nothing he should be uneasy about, yet this left his restless.

And thus, right when the lunch from the afternoon was about to be

completely digested, the sound of the workshop door being knocked on left Kusla with trepidation in some aspects.

The only ones with any business to come to this workshop would be the Knights.

This might be the start of many years of mundane daily life.

Kusla opened the door, and spotted a young soldier waiting outside the door.

However, the latter's eyes were astoundingly stinging.

"Lord Alzen is looking for you."

"What?"

"That knowledge of yours is required?"

Knowledge? Was there something amazing found?

Kusla had such a deduction in his mind, but the soldier told him with a hushed voice,

"Please hurry as the situation is dire."

Kusla sensed someone prodding him on the back.

He realized this was causing his heart to race, and his face showed a twisted smirk of 'Interest'.

The leader of the migrants under the Azami's Crest was the red-bearded Archduke Kratol, who would have alchemists perform fire breathing for his own bemusement. However, the one running the actual operations was the Herald Alzen.

His duty was to be the vanguard before the Forces, eliminate all obstacles before them, and even after entering this town, his duties had not change.

For any obstacle that came before the forces, he would have to eliminate them.

At this point, Alzen's face was as mortified as ever.

Kusla, Weyland and Irine were summoned, so Fenesis too was called along. It

appeared Alzen it had only known of her old position, for he was a little surprised by Irine's age.

"If the skills are the real deal, that shall be fine."

Saying that, he brought Kusla and the others into the room by his office.

Over there was a large sword, shield, armor, and also arrows and barding.

"...These are?"

"The soldiers headed West two days ago brought them back."

Alzen briefly explained.

The soldiers headed West were probably the ones left in this town. These soldiers who had fought in the war had to return after it was over, and though they could have gone down south, given their heavy baggage of broadswords and armor, it would be faster for them to head West for the time being and use the sea route.

The words the soldiers headed West two days ago brought them back left Kusla curious.

For that was not a journey that could be made to and fro within a day or two.

And looking at the armor equipment, Fenesis and even Irine were left intimidated.

The equipment were littered with blood stains and dirt.

"Know where did these come from?"

But Alzen did not specify, instead asking only about this.

"Asking where they come from?"

"Yes. You should know."

Again, he thought of alchemists as omnipotent, so Kusla grumbled in his mind. Since his superior has asked, so he could only answer. He picked the sword up, while Weyland brought his face towards the armor, as though sniffing the blood. Irine, who had been perplexed about these things, apprehensively raised an arrow and inspected it.

There were already breaks in the blade of the sword Kusla took.

That alone would not determine anything however, for even a sword would show signs if cracks after many repeated uses. However, there were stains caused by fats, clearly showing that this sword did taste blood, and had clearly been used to slay others before.

"Looking at how soft this one is, it does seem the blacksmith was aiming for maximum malleability."

"Also, this one should have been produced in a large workshop. The quality is pretty uniform~"

Weyland compared a few sets of armor that were laid out, saying this,

"Even the shape of the arrows...the quality of the metal is even. Probably produced in a town with a blacksmith guild."

Irine too spoke with much apprehension.

They were of high quality, and there was mass production of similar quality. Such indicated that the equipment was made by several major workshops under the thorough control of a guild.

And thus, there were few possible answers.

"The specifics can only be known once the equipment is brought back for proper inspection, but there's no doubt the equipment are from the far South. Every equipment feels like an annoying boast from the blacksmith. Only major cities in those countries like the Drabeldy Southern Naval Union or the Lutsiano Empire will have such major guilds..."

These were all countries located in the far South, where the Holy Cathedral of the Church's headquarters and the merchants who controlled massive wealth domineered the place. Kusla wondered as he stared at the equipment, conscious of the fact that these things reached this place after such a long journey.

"And so? Is this all?"

Kusla asked fearlessly, and Alzen frowned, looking crossed.

"What we shall discuss next has nothing to do with you. More importantly, I

want to know the logistics flow of such equipment, whether they can be easily obtained."

"...The merchants should be more aware of this than us, no?"

Kusla easily sidestepped the question, and at that moment, Alzen seemed to have stopped breathing due to his rage.

Kusla watched Alzen's reaction, not daring to let his guard down.

As the Herald, he obviously knew he should be inquring the merchants on such matters.

There was surely a reason as to why he did not do so.

"Tell us what you know."

Alzen sounded extremely anxious, unlike the frivolous attitude he showed at Gulbetty.

"Were the soldiers attacked by bandits while wearing such equipment?"

Alzen did not let out an audible gasp, but it seemed he could not evade it easily. Such an unbecoming silence gave Kusla the answer he wanted.

Kusla let out a little chuckle.

"Good work there."

Leaving these words behind, Alzen left the room, followed by his men. Kusla, left behind in the room, let out a sigh, while Weyland too started pinching away at his hair.

"H-hey."

"Huh?"

Irine could not endure the silence any longer, as she asked,

"What did that conversation mean?"

Her expression seemed to indicate that she had somewhat understood.

"It's simple."

Kusla held the hilt of the sword again, and the sword itself gave a little slither.

```
"It looks like the war has yet to end."
```

"Hm?"

"This sword had just slayed someone."

Hearing Kusla's words, Irine gasped, and took a step back, while Fenesis was left stunned.

"It's one thing if it had been a raid by the remnants~"

Weyland too finally looked away from the armor, lifting his head as he explained.

"Yes. If they are just remnants, Lord Alzen could have had them eliminated with just a swing of his authority."

"…"

In a surprising move, Fenesis latched onto a wordless irine's arm.

"Are we in danger?'

Fenesis asked, and Kusla smirked.

"It's common."

"No way that will happen."

They said with much conviction.

This young lady tried fortune telling by pouring lead into water to know if everyone could remain together.

But like Kusla, surely this girl had experienced in situations more precarious than this.

"...Sorry partners."

Saying that, Kusla sheathed the sword. Fenesis was a little rattled hearing the term partners, but she tried her best to maintain her poise.

"First, we need to note how frantic Alzen was. These weapons are top quality."

"Little Irine should know how much money is needed to create these weapons, no"?"

Irine gulped, as though she was interrogated by Weyland's question.

"... Enough to build a house in a village."

"And able to buy a house in a town. There is a huge difference in standing between bandits and Knights, but the real difference is simply the equipment they have. The only difference between blacksmiths and alchemists is curiosity, but which of the differences is bigger?"

"So, what are you getting at?"

Irine asked anxiously,

And Kusla shrugged.

"Kazan might not have been conquered."

"Huh? But-"

This place was known as Kazan.

But just as lead can be turned into gold, so gold can be turned into lead.

"That might simply be a trap."

Kazan was not conquered, but used to lure the enemy deep within.

The Knights did not conquer, but was swallowed.

"Just as you lot did to me."

Kusla looked over at Fenesis and Irine.

"If a single crux remains unclear, the outcome deduced will become a whole lot different."

"...I-in other words?"

Irine asked.

And then, the door to the room opened.

"Head back to the workshop for now."

Kusla gave a glance at Alzen's man.

"Do not inform anyone else of what happened here."

And the man spoke up before Kusla and the others could say anything.

Kusla looked over at Irine, his face practically stating this was how it was.

Alzen and Archduke Kratol were stationed in the old town hall facing the dragon fountain plaza. Once Kusla and the others exited, they had some murmurs.

It seemed soldiers were being summoned by a trumpet.

Everyone else present noticed the intent, and were uneasy, but showed no timidity.

"And what of our dear Knights?"

A couple with their stall by the roadside teased. They were probably migrants who had just moved into this town, and typically, they would assume as such, The enemy probably regrouped, wanting to fight for honor. They are all remnants. It's common to hear the merchants and musicians talk up such tragic, maddening stories for honor in the inns.

Some of them seemed to be saying similar things with much glee.

The people heard the trumpet call, and looked towards the plaza.

But Kusla and his group was the opposite, headed towards the workshop.

It was as though only the four of them knew the truth.

"We can beat the enemies we have once beaten, right?"

Irine asked,

"If only those are the same enemies."

Kusla answered.

And that day, once night arose, the town of Kazan was besieged by enemy forces.

That night, Kusla and the others did not sleep.

Yet they did not sleep, not because they feared the enemies besieging them.

"This is...the...last..."

With the thunk of a hammer, Irine fell backwards, and right when she was

about to land, Kusla grabbed her. Her work was finally done, and the sky finally showed day.

Some neighboring workshops continued to work. The blacksmiths that had migrated from the South were gathered and working in empty workshops. Kusla laid Irine down, and suddenly noticed her hands were bloodied with blisters, battered.

"Hey, bring some bandages and ointment

Fenesis, who too was looking weary, was slumped on the chair when she heard Kusla's command, and teetered to her feet, entering the inner room.

Soon after, she brought whatever Kusla wanted, before collapsing on the spot again.

"...You can go to sleep too. Good work for the day."

Fenesis did not have any decent blacksmithing skills to speak of, and toiled for the entire night running chores for Kusla, Weyland and Irine.

She probably was not in the mood to lament her lack of skills.

She nodded, but even as she closed her eyes, she did not lie down.

So weary she was that she could not sleep.

The workshop was utterly busy. Soon after Kusla and the others investigated the bloodied weapons and the trumpet call was made, the mercenaries and Knights swarmed the workshops.

They were looking for blacksmiths, hoping to repair the weapons they neglected to maintain out of sloth.

Over many years, the Knights had been conquering towns everywhere with gusto, and expanding territories. So overwhelming were the Knights that once a town was conquered, the remnants would not dare to approach after much dithering. The possibility of a town being attacked again after being conquered was practically nil. This had led to bouts of arrogance in the majority, only dressed up to join the advance. Of them, the majority were mercenaries who had fixed commission rates no matter the state of their equipment.

It seemed Alzen had quickly realized this; he commanded the blacksmiths to

enter the workshops, issued fuel to them, and had them process the weapons overnight. The swords were sharpened, the buckles, armors, helmet, lances, battleaxes and various weapons were all dealt with immediately. Other blacksmiths should be doing the same thing elsewhere along the blacksmith street.

In the workshop Kusla and the others were in, the busiest of all was undoubtedly Irine.

In the meanwhile, Kusla and Weyland were completely focused on other word. Using the molds left behind in the workshop, they built iron blocks used as ammunition for catapults, or materials used to repair the wall the Knights had demolished when conquering Kazan. Purity and quality aside, speed was of the essence, and such was completely opposite of the usual work alchemists did. Burned iron blocks had to be stacked up on carriages before proper cooling. Even with thick deerskin gloves on, one could get scalded easily.

Kusla applied ointment on Irine's hands, wrapped them in bandages, and dragged her to the wall by the furnace, laying her down horizontally. The furnace had burned for the entire night, and thus the house was warm, and no issues for her to sleep like this. Weyland had already taken off his shirt and laid on the floor. One might even suggest he was concussed rather than sleeping.

Kusla reached his hand for the flask by his side, and was really grateful that it contained water. With water in hand, he brought it to Fenesis' side.

It had been a while since he was this exhausted.

And yet he felt extremely refreshed.

"Drink up."

Kusla handed the water to Fenesis as he said this. However, she had no strength to receive, so he could only bring the water to her lips, as she clumsily drank it down.

Water kept spilling by her lips, yet neither of them had the strength to bother with that.

After gulping down some water, Fenesis shook her head lightly, and Kusla finished off the rest of the water.

As the area around the furnace was too hot, the water inside the flask was hot.

"...Puuah...fuuu."

Even though the water was almost boiling, it was soothing once he drank it.

At this moment, one could hear sounds of work from other workshops if they pricked their ears.

"So a war hasn't happened yet?"

"...u...huh...?"

Fenesis coughed, her voice hoarse.

Kusla patted her on the back, the petite back of her so small it was unnerving for him.

"Want more?"

Fenesis shook her head, took a deep breath, and finally calmed down.

However, once she did, the words that reached her lips were swallowed again.

Kulsa gave a few glances at her sidelong face, and said,

"What do you want to ask?"

Fenesis probably anticipated the question, as she did not show much surprise.

"What next?"

A feeble girl shivering with uneasiness would never ask what would be next.

Kusla gave a little chuckle.

"See what they do first."

Alzen gave the order to repair the walls, for he determined that the enemy were so numerous, they could not be beaten back at once.

If the enemy were just remnants comprised of nobles who were chased out of town, they probably would fight for the namesake of their birthtown rather than die as an alien in a different land; for that matter, Alzen probably would not overreact this much.

At the very least, the enemy was an organized army.

Also, there were the bloodied weapons Kusla and the others saw.

"Holding the fort."

"Hm?"

"To be honest, I do dislike it somewhat."

Fenesis responded. If she had expressed the same tone when stating her dislike of onions in soup, surely she would be cuter than she was.

"It feels like I am being strangled, that time ceases to pass."

She came from the starting point of the Crusades, the Promised Land. The tragedies she experienced in the war were not something Kusla could compared.

"What is the possibility of us holding down the fort..."

Kusla tersely noted.

"...What did the mercenaries say ...?"

"Hm, well, they said the town is thoroughly surrounded. It might not be that exaggerated, but given how the Knights are using the remaining fuel left in the town for smelting to fortify the defenses, this shows that they are cornered."

Fenesis lifted her head towards Kusla,

"... Are you saying that even the Knights won't be able to defend this place?"

"So I think."

Kusla grimly noted.

"They lack preparation."

"Prepar...ation...?"

"Yes."

Kusla drank the remaining water.

"The mercenaries, and even the Knights were permitted to come along without their weapons readied. The Knights had won too much. Thinking about

it this way, they probably slacked off in other facets."

This workshop had no lights lit on the previous day.

Why was that?

"This town is far from the South, far from the sea. The supply route remains unestablished. What will happen if we try to defend this place?"

"Ahh..."

"They had to send a messenger to our workshop just to remind us not to waste fuel. They are truly lacking in supplies."

Kusla did not know how many days of fuel they had left.

But once a mishap happened, he would associate everything he saw with the worst outcome possible.

"The enemy dares to defy the Knights who have controlled everything under the heavens, so clearly they have come up with some countermeasures. They must have made their thorough investigations and decided to attack. Looking at how quick they mobilized, there is no doubt they had set up an ambush here. In other words, they had contacted the rulers nearby and conspired against the Knights. No matter which direction we break through, there will be an enemy present."

"...B-but, they—"

"Yes, they did kowtow to the Knights at the border office, one after another. Alzen probably was fooled too. In hindsight, it is obvious. They had colluded together to import gold and silver. They said it was gifting for the long journey, but they gave not food, but vast amounts of reward."

If they had offered food, the Knights would have feasted and finished them off. However, if they intended to retake Kazan, they could then reclaim it back.

"That amazing feast yesterday should have taken up quite a lot of food. The Knights would only do so if they expected things to proceed smoothly."

Fenesis' body froze up. Perhaps she felt it was ironic.

For she, who often proceeded enthusiastically, she believed that luck would

be more than she imagined.

"So even if we hold the fort, will the Knights hang on until their comrades come to save them...though I want to say this."

"Eh?"

"I wonder if the reinforcements will come..."

What are you trying to say? So Fenesis gave that look, and Kusla too seemed self-aware of this.

"You say that I'm always so pessimistic."

"...!"

"But no matter what, no matter how I think when I'm tired, I can't think of anything positive. Most importantly..."

Till this point, Kusla paused.

Fenesis gave a skeptical look, but he could only shake his head.

Most importantly, no matter his thoughts, it was a mere waste of effort.

No matter how riled up Kusla and the others were in the town, they were ultimately employed by the Knights, and protected. All that could affect future developments were Alzen and Archduke Kratol above him, or a certain higher command far from this town.

He would only be drifted away by the wave, and the only thing he could do was to swim better in the tide. Given his own position, he could not change the flow itself.

"Have some sleep first. Who knows when we will need to work again."

Saying that, Kusla closed his eyes, and laid down.

After some apprehension, Fenesis too did the same.

She laid gently upon Kusla's back, for she might be cold.

But no matter how worried Kusla was, the Knights' soldiers were high in morale.

Both friend and foe were glaring at each other over the wall, and the main street linking the front gates and the plaza were crammed with soldiers. They were like hunting hounds waiting to be released. Other than them, the craftsmen and merchants were harboring much anticipation no inferior to the soldiers, for there was no way they could simply give away the New Lands they finally arrived at.

At the same time, a few people were wandering around the streets like timid dogs, or sealing their houses shut. They were original residents of this town, who used to live with those outside the walls just several weeks ago. It was practically impossible for them to view those outside the war as enemies, and at the same time, they could not just stand on the Knights side unconditionally.

Those people, Kusla felt, were the ones they had to be worried about. Perhaps they were waiting for the moment to strike the Knights from within.

But in any case, the current situation remained unstable.

Quite a few had felt the Knights had been winning all the time, and surely they would win again. IT was not a bad idea to think as such, for when morale was high, just hearing the shout of the soldiers would give the vibe that the battle was won before it started.

But unfortunately, Kusla was an alchemist. Alchemists had to keep frowning, and not let any superstition or delusion cloud their eyes.

"I say, you're always giving that sulk, even I'm low on morale."

Kusla went out to check on the town, and in the meantime, went to the obtain blankets issues from the inn. When he returned, he found Irine, who had already taken a bath, returning from the town's cookery.

She devoured all the dishes like a ferocious beast awakened from its slumber, covered in soot as she dusted the furnace. Once the cleaning was done, she went for another bath, probably to wash the dirt off her.

"There was once a battle at Gulbetty, but the Knights were as strong as bears."

She twisted her hair, rubbed it, and bundled it without waiting for it to dry. Truly she was a blacksmith girl with an impatient personality.

```
"Surely they will win again. Crush the enemies again, no?"
  Irine's words seemed representative of all the migrants.
  "if that were the case, of course not. This is a case of mental preparation."
  Kusla said, put down the blankets, and walked out.
  "Where are you going?"
  "The guild's archives."
  "...How serious."
  Irine said, looking dumbfounded.
  "Lay out a blanket on her. When she wakes up, don't let her get to me. Don't
let a girl run alone on the streets."
  "Yes yes."
 Irine answered, looking unamused, and waved her hand to shoo Kusla.
 The latter walked out, and went off in a direction completely opposite of the
plaza where the guild was located.
 He stood at a place somewhere far from the workshop entranced, and tapped
at the wooden window of the workshop's bedroom.
  "Hey."
  He called out, and showing up with a sleepy face was Weyland.
  "What is it"?"
  "Get out here."
 Though Weyland gave a digusted look, he did not refuse. He stretched lazily,
"Alrighty" and hopped out of the window.
  "Doesn't look like you have some interesting words to say"."
 Weyland walked by Kusla's side, kicking at pebbles as he said so.
  "You're thinking the same, aren't you?"
  "Hm?"
  "We'll lose this battle."
```

Kusla spoke with much conviction, his words differing from irine and Fenesis.

"Nnn...fufu."

Weyland laughed, scratching the tip of his nose.

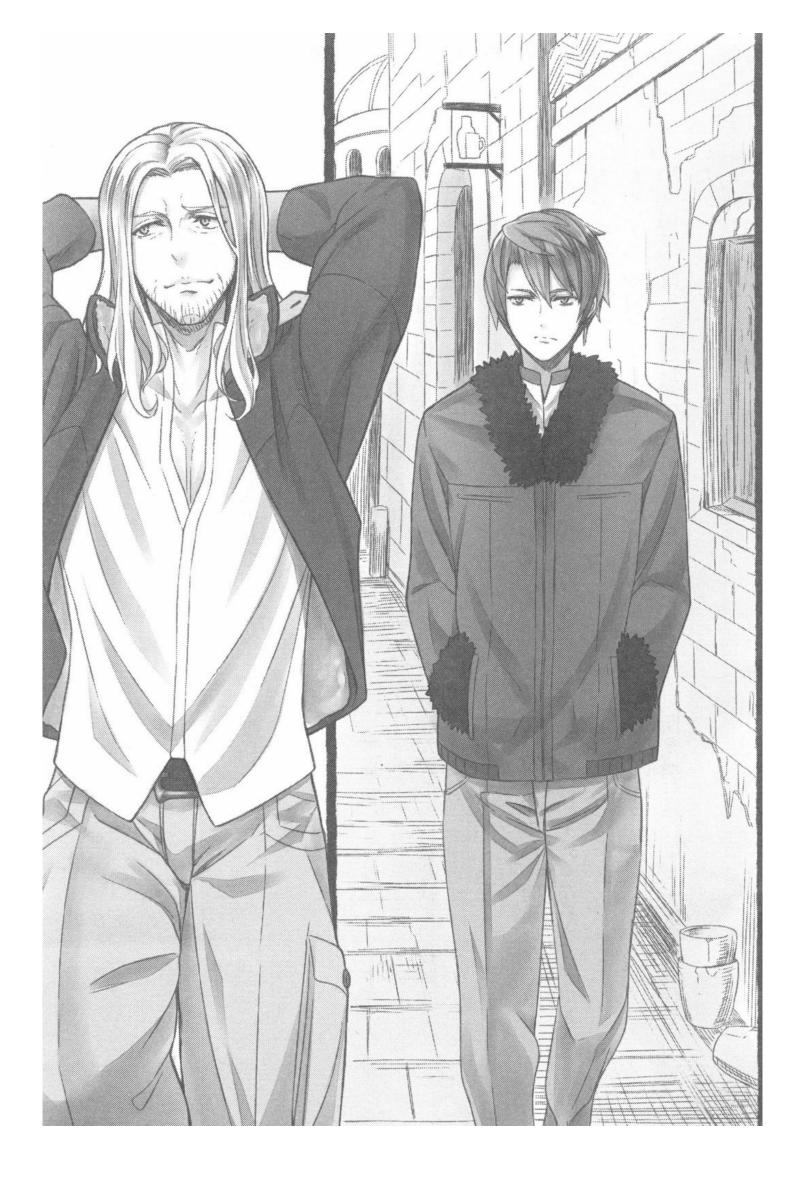
But Kusla was not angered by this.

"So? Do you have anything you want to say this~?"

For he had anticipated these words.

"You know the situation, don't you? Those two girls."

Weyland cupped his hands behind his head, still giving the reluctant look,



"Yeah, we'll likely lose this battle. We fell into the trap the moment the Queen of Latria converted". Those weapons were produced by the South". Without the assistance of the nearby rulers, it is impossible for them to attack. The North and South teamed up and managed to bait us successfully"

"If the pagans who are supposed to be beaten are not around, the next prey will be the Knights."

"Hohoh. The Knights sucked up too much of the pagans' blood". That's why they are viewed as terrifying pagans""

The Knights experienced a growth completely different from the existing rulers, through expanding their territories. In the process, they amassed many enemies. Anyone could tell if a step back was taken, followed by an overview. But despite this, nobody would have expected this to happen.

Latria was on the brink of destruction, and the various Southern countries had obtained all the profits them could obtain in the war against the pagans. The greedy Knights wanted to continue fighting the final pagan countries, declare war upon them, and devoured them. In that case, what would the various countries following the footsteps of the Knights think?

Would they hunt the fattened swines for the sake of their common interests?

The moment the Queen of Latria converted to Orthodoxy, the people invading the lands became enemies of God.

And since both sides had become Orthodox followers, it was no wonder an alliance was formed between the North and the South.

Foolish were the Kazan who were blinded by their continuous victories, about to devour the gold mine that was Kazan.

"But these are just hypotheses~"

Weyland leisurely noted.

Kusla took out a piece of paper from his clutches, and handed it to Weyland.

"What is this"?"

"The enemy tossed this letter in over the town walls, to rattle."

"...Hm."

Weyland murmured, and opened that crumpled piece of paper.

"The Knights leading you have been deemed as one of the heretics. Drop your weapons now. Your reinforcements..."

Will not come.

"We might have been able to dismiss these taunts calmly if not for these weapons and equipment. There's no doubt these weapons are the biggest proof that there are some of the Southerners in the enemy. Alzen obviously realized that. We really fell into a huge trap this time."

It was likely similar matters were happening all over Latria.

The Knights were already giddy with victories, and brought the migrants over without building up the town structure.

To think they had taken a large munch on Latria.

Rather, it might have been considered a hunter's trap instead.

"Want to surrender?"

Faced with this joking tone, Kusla finally broke into a grin.

"You got to be joking. The Knights will definitely be a synonym for heretics starting tomorrow."

The reason why the Knights became so big was that no matter how much they robbed those who were labeled as pagans, they would be granted forgiveness by God.

Thus, what would those intending to rob whatever the Knights built up do?

Further thought into this matter was unnecessary.

The Knights would simply be dealt with as heretics. They simply needed to be suppressed, their fortunes confiscate.

In other words, anyone discovered to be part of the Knights would be executed, and anyone sparing the Knights would be an ally, deemed as heretics.

"No way will those people hold back now. Everyone is conspiring to deem the

Knights as evil. Anyone holding back will be deemed as an enemy by the others. Lots of similar matters happened in the hunting of the pagans, no?"

"That's how it is~"

Weyland rolled the enemy's letter into a ball and casually tossed it aside. Every person in town would spot this sooner or later.

"Alzen is probably awaiting the moment escape. The resources in the town are insufficient to maintain a siege defense, no reinforcements are coming. And unfortunately, this is the enemy's territory"

Weyland noted nonchalantly, but the truth of the matter was as he had stated.

What was the nature of this town in the first place? This was a town conquered by the Knights, with quite a few of its original residents still inhabiting.

IF they too responded to the call of the enemies outside and took arms, what would happen?

The Knights would be flankered within and out.

In any case, surely they would lose.

"They can't possibly run away at this point. Those rowdy, riled up fellows still think they can crush the enemy at once. If they are to know that the leaders intend to bail from this town, a riot might be incited. Alzen probably would have them fighting a skirmish, and have them understand the enemy were not just defeated remnants of nobles."

"Hm."

Weyland stroked his stubble chin, and said,

"Of course, we can only escape when the chance presents itself while they attack...ah, so you called me out here for this reason, Kusla~?"

Weyland tilted his head as he noted.

Kusla was not angered in the slightest. He too was stunned by his own thoughts.

"Have them stay in the town."

Even if they did escape, they would surely be pursed. The Knights would be disadvantaged even at the place they would be escaping towards.

When that happened, what would happen to the two young ladies Irine and Fenesis when they remained amidst a group of wounded, trapped beasts? Surely it was obvious that nothing good would happen.

In that case, their chances of survival might be better if they remained in the town.

Wiping out the Knights and massacring the merchants and blacksmiths who migrated here were two separate matters.

No matter how much they warred, construction was a necessity.

"And so?"

Weyland taunted. Kusla took a breath, and said,

"Help me convince them."

Kusla turned around, and spotted Weyland grinning away.

But Kusla did not avert his eyes.

"You could have just left them here without a word. I thought the moniker of 'Interest' for the cold-blooded Kusla would have done so already~"

"You might want to bring them along."

"Haha."

Weyland chortled, and said,

"At the very least, I can still determine which is the appropriate decision."

His expression was filled with agony, but because of this, it did seem there was a snake-like coldness.

"It might be more beneficial for those two to remain in town". As for little UI, you can handle her, Kusla"

"I might need your help regarding that."

"Eh?"

Weyland raised an eyebrow, but Kusla did not answer.

"Well, I can help you want". More importantly, when you are going to spit it out?"

"As soon as possible."

Kusla stated without much thought, and Weyland's eyes immediately sparkled.

"There's some time until separation, and more things you can do~."

"...What do you mean by that?"

"Hahaha. Don't play now now~~~"

u n

Thinking that it was pointless to continue this spat, Kusla clicked his tongue.

But right when he was about to return to the workshop with Weyland.

A deafening roar, one akin to a burst dam, echoed.

It was at a place Kusla and the others could not hear, but they understood what happened.

The war started.

The people probably assumed this was the first battle to protect their town.

But it was likely the start of a long journey on their quest for survival.

Kusla and Weyland returned to the workshop, and saw that Fenesis had awaken, still copying away. Irine was left perplexed when she saw Weyland next to Kusla, while Fenesis' face changed when she saw Kusla. It seemed she realized something.

Thus, once the explanation of the matter was made, only Irine appeared to have faltered.

```
"B-but, that's—"
```

"You feel reluctant, don't you?"

Kusla deliberately said so, and irine seemed intimidated as she replied, "N-not at all."

Seeing how irine was trying to act tough, Weyland chuckled. She turned her head aside in a fit, you can laugh all you want, so she reacted.

"In any case, the battle has already started, and the stage is set. It'll be too late to take action the. At this point, let's just do whatever we can do right now."

"Yeah...prepare some valuables so that they can be paned off."

With Kusla and Weyland staring at her, Irine was left terrified. Only Fenesis curled her lips with a stoic look, accepting the current situation unconditionally.

"But what are we going to do~?"

"Leaving it to you."

"Heh? Never thought you would trust me". So happy"

Weyland giggled, and shrugged.

"You think that I will be the only one who won't be in danger~?"

"I have to talk to this fellow."

Could Fenesis continue to live if she remained in this town?

Weyland gave a perturbed smile, scratched his head, "Yes yes." And replied.

"But...yes. What about little UI?'

Irine then asked.

Fenesis was one of the cursed bloodline, always reviled by others. Her mere existence was prove of heresy.

A girl with such outstanding traits could not possibly remain hidden if she stayed in this town.

"[..."

Fenesis' tone was as icy as when she first met Kusla and Weyland, and the moment she spoke up, "For her, this town is a safe place."

"Hm?"

Irine blurted out, and Weyland too looed surprised,

"You should know, don't you?"

Kusla looked over at Fenesis as he said this, and the latter went silent for a while, before nodding away.

"W-what do you mean?"

"We went to see the murals of the Cathedral built from the quarry."

Irine stared at Kusla in shock.

The latter shrugged.

"There were people like her depicted on the murals. Most likely, they are the ones who came to this town in ancient times, when the town was born, and provided the technology. These mutants are naturally recorded in the murals along with the people of this town. In other words, she might gain a stable life if she remains in this town."

"B-but—"

"Miss Irine."

Irine was about to say something, but Fenesis stopped her.

"It is fine. Even if we cannot stay... I can still wander like I did before."

How many would be able to maintain such a peaceful smile.

Irine looked forlorn, struggling for words.

But she could not utter the spell to resolve everything.

"And...even if I do come along, I know I will only get in the way. As you said, if this is a trap to frame the Knights as heretics, you cannot bring me along."

Fenesis understood very well the sort of existence she was.

She looked towards Kusla, and said,

"Thank you for bringing me here until the very end."

A kind smile.

Kusla did not lower his head, and neither did he return the smile.

He was akin to an agitated cat, averting his ears. Fenesis could not hide her smile, and stood up from her chair.

"I shall assist in preparation for the trip, for your preparations are re-really lack."

She hastily finished off her words, and went into the room.

None of the others could speak up. Weyland maintained a poker face, and Irine closed her eyes as she ruffled her hair. She was probably fuming at herself, for being so powerless, yet as a blacksmith, she was the most likely of the quartet to live on in this town.

And Kusla went out.

"Curses."

Irine opened her eyes, calling out for Kusla, but the latter ignored her.

Kusla went to the corridor, hesitated for a moment, and returned to the bedroom.

Upon imagining the young lady sobbing away in the storage room, even he felt he went overboard.

But he had a feeling Fenesis might really be preparing for a journey.

"Hey."

And as he had expected, Fenesis was seated on the bed, laying out the contents of his bag.

She did not look back, only her hands were moving.

One hand was grabbing at something, while the other was wiping her face as she made herself look really busy.

Fenesis was not concealing her tears in the slightest.

"Crying won't change anything—"

Kusla lowered his head at Fenesis, noting,

"For all of us, this is the best choice."

Unlike the ruckus caused by Weyland in Gulbetty, when he nearly missed the opportunity to head to Kazan, there was no better option for the four of them.

If Kusla and Weyland stayed in this town, they would be involved and hanged as a demonstration. Irine and Fenesis would not meet a decent end if they escaped with the Knights however.

Thus, should they not try to escape from this town, without the help of the Knights?

For the people who had never lived outside the towns, they would only feeling the cruelty from God as they venture the barren Northern lands.

Kusla stood by Fenesis' side.

Fenesis, still sobbing away, did not lift her head as she understood the reasoning behind this.

Kusla knelt down, putting his hand on her head.

"I did console you like this when we first met, didn't I?"

Kusla curled his lips, giving a sarcastic sneer.

Fenesis continued to weep, her face melting with the tears as she lifted her head.

"This town does have the luck, as you said."

And so, he caressed her face, as she closed her eyes and continued to cry some more.

However, she slowly lifted her head, putting her own hand on Kusla's.

Once Kusla returned to the workshop, Weyland and Irine looked over at him in unison.

```
"What? My fault now?"
```

"N-not at all...but—"

Irine hesitated to say, and Kusla was taken by surprise, for right behind him was Fenesis, still sniveling away.

"I am fine."

Fenesis sniveled, and repeated.

"I am fine."

Irine gave an anguished look, gritting her teeth.

"What do we do next?"

"Prepare some valuables, and I'll do the final checks."

"Checks?"

"The Knights will leave a back route whenever they conquered a town. The pagan clergymen in Kazan should be imprisoned. If they are used, it should be easy to convert the religion of this town.

When converting, the most effective method would be to have those respected lead the charge.

The Knights' hypothesis was that anything that could be used would be used. Thus, they probably did not kill off those clergymen.

"Then, Kusla, you're going to the Knights..."

Weyland spoke up, and looked over at the door.

Kusla shrugged.

"Saved me some time."

The door was knocked upon, as though their conversation was chanced upon.

"Envoy of the Knights here. Lord Alzen is summoning you."

It seemed Kusla and the others were not the only ones to predict the future.

The door opened, and the youth always by Alzen side was standing outside.

Kusla smirked, but not because such a major person had come over to summon them. The young aide's face was clearly tense, trying to apprehend Kusla and the others from escaping.

Kusla had initially assumed the commotion came from outside the town.

But once he approached the plaza, he realized not all the commotion came

from outside the town.

"...This is..."

Irine muttered without a second thought. Alzen's aide, who had been walking for them, pretended not to have noticed anything. There were goods tossed around everyone, and looking at the inside of the building with its door ajar, one would immediately understand what was going on. Whisked out of the building were goods, a merchant man, some others dressed finely, all tied up.

The atmosphere in town had obviously changed drastically.

The Knights soldiers had realized those outside the town were not simply defeated remnants.

And Alzen had carefully laid out his next move.

"Robb—"

Kusla covered the mouth of the clumsy Irine. Everyone present knew that it was a robbey, but if gold was mentioned by everyone, lead too would turn into gold.

"This is to punish those that had disclosed information to the outside."

The young man leading them turned his back around as he said so. It was merely a part of war, so to say. Irine turned her face away, unwilling to witness the scene developing at the plaza. The other girl was probably used to such a scene, or probably drained of tears due to the sobbing she had, for she was left with a blank look.

Kusla and the others were again brought to the old town hall. Even inside there, there were piles of robbed goods. They sidestepped the people moving through the avenues between the goods, and went deep into the building.

"Please wait."

Kusla and the others were then brought to a small dark room. The door was locked, and the click of a lock could be heard. It was probably to prevent Kusla and the others from escaping, or perhaps, it was to protect them from being assaulted.

In any case, the wooden window remained opened, and they could only hear

the ruckus outside town.

The four of them remained standing as they were, and Weyland quickly laid down on a long bench, Irine sat on a wooden box, while Kusla and Fenesis sat by the wall.

"Hey."

First to speak up at this moment was Irine,

"Are you two really intending to abandon us here?"

Fenesis, right beside Kusla at this point, shivered.

Weyland continued to lie on the bench, his eyes closed.

Kusla said,

"I do feel that it's better to face a bunch of people who had fought a tough battle and returned to their territory, than it is to mix around with a bunch of barbarians, wandering around and all lost."

Would Alzen still abide by military rules when it was time to run for their lives?

Quite the opposite, for he might hand Irine and Fenesis over to raise the army's morale. If any mishap were to happen, they might get in the way, and Alzen would surely abandon the two girls, ignoring the wills of Kusla and Weyland. It was more beneficial for them to remain in this town. At the very least, there should be some mercy from the victors controlling this place.

As long as they lived, surely they would have another chance to be reunited.

"I too know you are feeling restless about this, but this is the most logical option. We should choose the best one."

Kusla said, and Irine appeared to have some words to say, only to remain quiet.

"You can say that you are her maidservant. You two might be able to take care of each other too."

"...I...won't say such things here..."

Irine said with much disgust, and then, there was the sound of the door

unlocked.

The door opened, and the young man from before poked his head in.

"Lord Alzen is waiting to meet you. Come."

Kusla let out a wordless sigh, and obediently followed.

Kusla and the others were brought to Alzen's room. There was merely a strange darkness within, eerily quiet.

The wooden windows were sealed up, even to the creases, and not a single light shone inside.

Alzen remained seated alone in this dark room.

Just a night had passed, and he looked ever so dejected.

"...So you came."

His voice was hoarse, either from giving commands repeatedly, or that he was startlingly worn out. This might have been the first time Alzen had experienced defeat.

"For you called for us."

Kusla answered without courtesy, but Alzen's face showed no change.

The situation had become absolutely dire.

"There is only one thing I have summoned you for."

"To turn lead into gold?"

Be outrage. This is the only thing that can change this heavy atmosphere.

However, Alzen ignored Kusla's taunt, and nodded.

"Yes. May your knowledge grant us something?"

"…"

Kusla did not answer.

Weyland continued in his place,

"Knowledge, as in, what"?"

"Poison, or something, anything..."

Upon hearing this lethargic voice, Kusla and Weyland exchanged looks,

"The poison we use are different from what hunters use"."

"Then, anything is fine."

Saying that, Alzen covered his face.

"Anything will do. Anything, anything will do...at this rate, we cannot escape out of this town. If we do not, we are finished!"

Alzen, the de facto leader of the Azami's Crest, let out such a weakness, and this directly tied to the fate of Kusla and the others.

"Can you not revive a chicken? Use that..."

At that point, Alzen swallowed his words.

What he was about to say next, Kusla could easily deduce,

Use that skill, to revive us corpses.

"Alchemists are not mages."

Kusla said, and Alzen did not respond, let alone answer,

An awkward, annoying silence lingered.

Kusla said,

"Will the reinforcements of the Knights not arrive?"

Alzen could only let out a chuckle.

"On the contrary, the people stationed deep inside Latria gave us the call for reinforcements, and it was the enemy who delivered."

Even their assistance had been surrounded.

The unfortunate messenger was probably in eternal slumber, having completed his mission.

"...There is a sea town from here, about a four full day and night journey on foot, with a fleet there. The Knights attacking Latria had their supplies shipped in from there, so their defenses should be strong. Our scattered comrades should all be gathered there. However..."

They might not be able to leave this town. In such a scenario, trying to flee to the West while fending off the pursuit of the enemy was just a dream. If they leave this place, surely they would be unable to return.

The people oppressed by the Knights would surely swarm in, close the gates, or invite the enemy forces outside.

In that case, in the one in ten thousand possibilities that it might happen, what would happen if the gates were sealed? They probably could maintain the siege by reducing the populace, but if they did so, the original inhabitants who sense their deaths looming would surely take up arms and fight to the very end.

Alzen probably spent the entire night pondering over this.

"We cannot leave, and we cannot stay, we're in a dilemma."

Thus, Alzen summoned Kusla and the others. The authoritarian of the Knights, more pragmatic than anyone else, had just inquired the alchemist if they could replicate the miracle to revive the dead, to have the chicken's soul return.

In mere days, they fell from Heaven to Hell.

But alchemists were not mages.

And alchemists were simply people who lived for themselves.

Seizing this opportunity, Kusla said,

"We can't contribute on the battlefield, but I do have an idea."

"...You have a proposal?"

"I do not know, I am still investigating into this."

...What?"

"I do hope to meet some people."

"People?"

"The priests controlling the worship in this town are still alive, right? I have some things to ask."

Alzen gave Kusla a blank look, and then showed a weary smile.

"Are you intending to revive the dragon?"

```
"Yes."
```

Alzen immediately showed a blank, chilling face. He then waved his hand off, as though shooing a fly, "Do as you please. They are in the underground jail."

I must be mad to rely on such empty things; he seemed to be implying. Kusla bowed courteously; everything was going as he expected, and in this sense, his plans were going smoothly.

The four of them left the room, and as they stepped onto the corridor, Kusla said,

"So now then, I shall be questioning."

"Hmm...I too shall struggle in my own way, huh~?"

Weyland said, and Kusla was about to bring Fenesis along to the jail.

At that moment,

"I shall go instead."

"Ah?"

Kusla turned around, and saw Irine grab Fenesis by the hand.

"What if they lose their minds if you bring little UI along? Better to probe first, right?"

Surely this made sense,

"But even so, I cannot allow you to go alone."

Kusla found it hard to accept Irine's preposition, but he understood she was worried about Fenesis, trying her best to help. Kusla could not think of any recent to argue with her, and thus accepted her view.

"I'll leave Weyland to you."

Kusla said, nudging Fenesis in the back.

She looked at him, her expression akin to an abandoned puppy. However, it was a fleeting moment.

"Now then, let's go~."

Weyland went along with Fenesis. The latter again turned to look at Kusla,

only to follow Weyland, "Hmph."

Kusla snorted, and walked in the direction of the underground jail, which he had inquired Alzen's aide on. On the way, he had the urge to remind her not to say anything unnecessary, and once they passed through the crowd, he was about to speak up.

```
At that moment,
"Hm? Hey!?"
Irine suddenly dragged Kusla into a small room.
She locked the door immediately, peeking outside for movements.
Once she saw that there were no footsteps outside, she looked at Kusla,
"...What's with this?"
Kusla asked with a repressed voice.
"I have something to say to you."
"... There's still time for a love confession, isn't there?"
" "
Irine looked up at Kusla, giving a sarcastic leer.
"You're annoying. Do you really think so?"
"Alchemists are always pessimistic."
"Well, you're right."
Kusla did not joke again, "And then?" he asked,
"If you haven't fallen for me, what now?"
```

Kusla asked, and Irine did not answer. She averted her eyes, looking at the door

At that fleeting moment, she seemed to have made her decision.

She turned her head around, showing no hesitation on her face.

"Now that you're asking, you have not noticed after all, don't you?"

"What are you saying?"

Irine again looked over at Kusla, took a deep breath, and sighed long and hard,

"About the possibility of little UI staying in this town."

"Hey, how many times do you want me to emphasize—"

"Unfortunately, I do not think there is such a possibility."

Before Kusla could chime in again, Irine took a parchment from her clutches again.

"Have a look at this."

Irine's red eyes were staring at Kusla; those were the eyes of one who only believed in what she saw, proud of the skills she had honed.

"This is?"

"I know what I am doing is like a child, but I am thinking that if everything goes as planned, it is better not to say it out. Without this, **little UI might be** able to continue living in this town, as you said."

Saying that, Irine handed the parchment over to Kusla, averting her eyes in anguish.

It was a piece of parchment shoved towards Kusla.

"You said that you alchemists believe that a single crux will overturn everything, right? **Then this too is a single crux**."

"...The terms you wanted to know came from these?"

"Yes. The 'ancient' 'archmage' who 'raided' and 'created'. The dragons spewing fire continued to rise from the lake connected to Hell, and before them, there were charred corpses. Looking at those still standing, I had a vague understanding."

In the last scene of the paintings, there were those with such obvious characteristics, dressed in clothing originating from the deserts far away, and beast ears.

"As you may have said, they brought the mining skills to this town. We don't know however if they did this out of goodwill."

"...With overwhelming skill, or at the very least, some power that can be thought of as magic, they razed these lands, and occupied it?"

"Yes. Just like us now."

Irine tersely noted.

She showed a look of disgust. Those words were simply too accurate.

"Seeing how there were several people like little UI on the paintings, I immediately understood why she was so admiring of dragons. But looking at them, I realized that might be it. The people like little UI who appeared on the paintings were not so kind-hearted. It just so happened that the situation back then was different from how it is now, that the people like little UI were not persecuted, but invaders. That's why they could mix in with the people of this town so openly, and they were like us until yesterday."

The last line was a self-depreciation on Irine's part.

Those deformed had something to do with the legend of the dragons in this town.

The 'Dragon Blood book' contained a line, to not reive the dragon again.

What did that mean? There was no need to inquire further into this question.

The invaders did not manage to remain on these lands. At a certain time, they were shooed, or buried.

Thinking about it, it was obvious.

Fenesis did have beast ears on her head. At the very least, there were kind people like Kusla and Irine willing to accept her. And most importantly, though Kusla was not willing to publicly admit, he did find Fenesis cute.

Why was this tribe treated as a cursed bloodline, constantly persecuted?

Wanderers were typically the bridge spreading skills and knowledge.

But as Irine said, they might not all be friendly. Especially when there is an overwhelming difference in skills, something too powerful would trigger something no different from an invasion, and it was not something extraordinary.

Thus, they became a tribe that invaded everywhere, with their overwhelming skills as weapons.

And thus viewed as a cursed tribe, one that would bring about Calamity.

"You wanted to meet the Clergymen here, right? I do think that if little UI is to meet those people, the situation will become dire. She's one of the cursed ones, and might become a curse herself."

Saying that, she looked up at Irine,

"Are you intending to let little UI stay?"

The history records of this town stated that everything would be reduced to ash, and revived again.

The wanderers were Creators, and Destroyers.

That was what Irine was hesitant to mention in the workshop.

But Kusla had to say,

"Even so, I don't think she will be fine if she comes along with us."

"And if she stays here, the result will be the same."

"So, might as well."

Cut off her ears.

Irine pointed her index finger on Kusla's chest, seemingly intending to seal away that cold, logical conclusion of his.

"Then, is it not better for her to remain by your side?"

Kusla was sucker punched, and was left speechless.

Irine scratched her head.

"She really wanted to be together. Don't you feel the same?"

Kusla was speechless.

His mind was in completely confusion, for he did not think of this.

"I know she is a baggage...her body cannot take such harshness. I tried travelling while hiding in the goods of the merchants, so I know very well how

much trouble it will cause the people when joining a caravan. This journey too... isn't something easy. I know what you are worried about."

It was not simply an issue of safety and lives.

Kusla went back to the logical reasoning he was used to.

"I...won't gamble on anything I know I won't be able to do. I have been watching over her the entire day. But what do you think I can do alone when faced with those people who are prone to violence? Or are you going to watch her be toyed with as a tool for comfort? Is it really fine for me to just bring her along?"

"This is not what I mean."

Irine shook her head, saying this,

"This is not what I am getting at. It is a matter of attitude."

"...Attitude?"

"Yes, you were the same back at Gulbetty. You were always thinking on how to have everyone live on. I am not saying this is a bad thing. You did think for little UI through your own way this time around, right? I don't like it, but I do know you are always thinking for her sake. That's how you ended up being used by us. But your thoughts are always about the best possible conclusions once you head your separate way."

"Is there any other option?"

Upon hearing this, Irine widened her eyes at Kusla.

She inhaled hard, her hair practically standing.

"You idiot!"

Her ferocity had Kusla taking a step back. She kept closing in on him, her chest almost sticking to him, and she appeared to be attempting to gnaw Kusla's throat as she said, "I want you to consider how both of you can continue to live on! Maybe the possibility to live on by going separate ways is more likely to happen. However, you can't just move along like a water wheel or a bellow!"

Irine panted away, glaring at Kusla.

And then, she continued to groan,

"You really are a bad person."

""

"I wouldn't be saying such things if you really are inhumane."

Irine took a step back, her clenched fist sticking to Kusla's chest.

"You are just pretending to be inhumane. You truly believe this is the only thing you can do on this world, doing such things that are the same as selfabuse...of course, I wouldn't have bothered with you if you are just any annoying person trying to get pity, but I can tell that you are just doing so to hold yourself back. If you truly are inhumane, you wouldn't have wrapped banadages on me or give her a blanket. You wouldn't have...prompted me to leave that town..."

Irine kept her bandaged fist on Kusla's chest, closed her eyes, opened them again, showing a strangely peeved look.

However, that expression seemed to be earnestly stating that even if there were some words he had to say, no matter how reluctant, "And...you aren't as stone faced as you imagined."

"Wha!"

Kusla gasped.

With a forlorn look, Irine grinned clumsily.

"Do you know how laughable you are? Little UI and I have been laughing at you behind your back."

Kusla instinctively touched his own face.

He understood himself very well, and always treated it as a matter of fact, never to be doubted.

For he was 'Kusla', only devoted to heading towards Magdala, giving his life up for this cause. Thus even though he had a girl next to him that he could call a lover, he would only think about spending time with her from time to time, and not have the goal to spend the rest of his life with her.

And thus, even when his lover was murdered, his eyebrows...

That was a lie.

Kusla realized that he was lying to himself.

When his lover was assassinated by the Knights, that calmness was merely fleeting. He never thought about using his lover's death to smelt gold, not because he was inhumane. The hopes he had in smelting was such that he wanted to create the sword of Orichalcum, to obtain the power to protect whatever most precious to him. Thus, there never was a mad alchemist who only thought about smelting even when his lover was murdered.

There was a man, who wanted to attain his Magdala as soon as possible, to avoid such a tragedy happening again.

And what made Kusla realize this was Fenesis.

"...I'm not smart enough to say anything impressive, but I do have a fine master who could give me advice. I'll tell you this."

Irine's fiery red eyes were staring right at Kusla.

"Carelessly doing one thing correctly is a lot better than being stubborn and doing something wrong. Smelting contains much uncertainty, and this is the most important issue. You have that stubborn personality, someone who will be a martyr to his own cause."

Because this is the one way to approach Magdala.

So Kusla had always thought.

However, there was a huge premise to this.

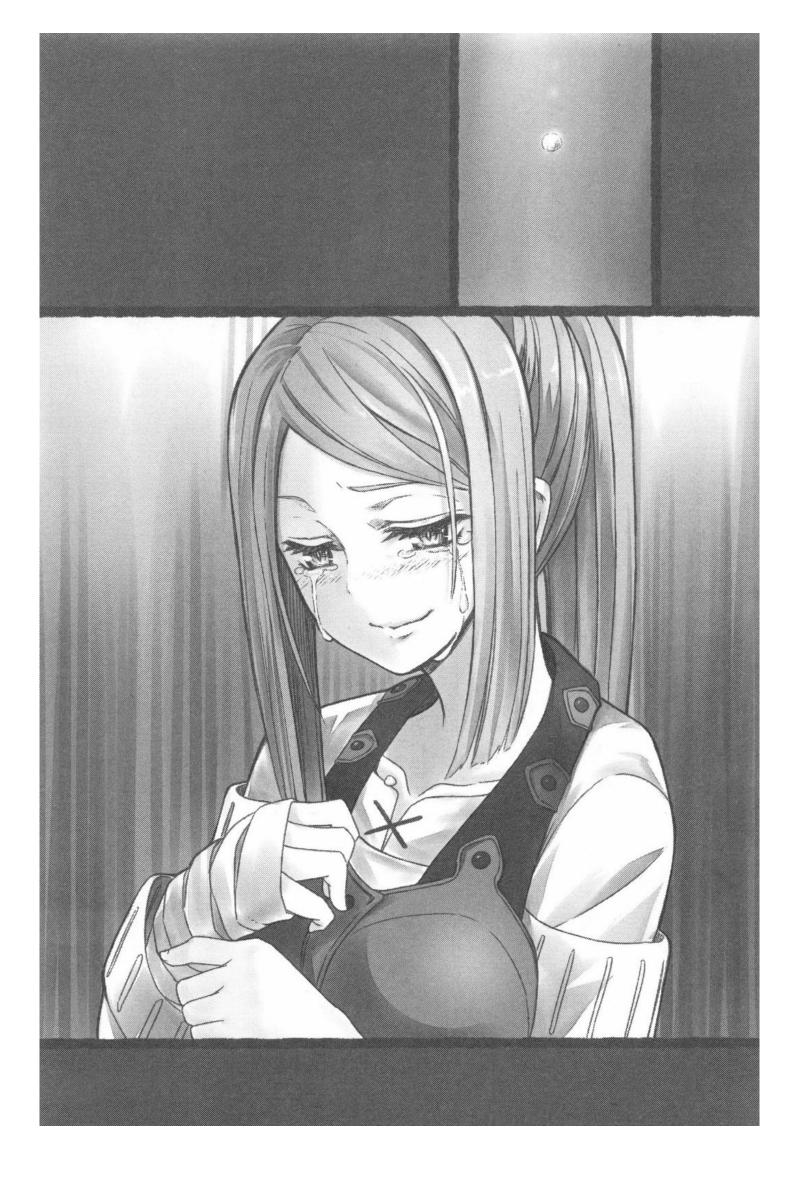
And that was, if he alone was to head towards Magdala.

"I know why you are anxious about it, because you and I are the same kind of idiots, but you better than me."

Saying this, Irine lowered her head, and forced a smile.

"I am really regretting it now. I always believed that if master and disciple have excessive feelings, the smithing skills will drop. That is why I had always been so stubborn. Even though he was so kind, so outstanding a person."

Saying that, Irine was gushing out tears.



"I was always being stubborn, so once I got that nudge from you, I decided to do the right thing, no matter how carelessly it is...but I won't regret it. If I had stayed in that town, I would be suffering more than I have now."

Saying that, she clumsily wiped her tears with her sleeves.

And then, her expression reverted back to the old adamant look she had, basically stating that any pains she experienced during her apprenticeship could be wiped away like the tears.

"Think of something."

Truly it was a strange diction.

"You are a great alchemist who can turn lead into gold, right? Prove it to me that alchemists can occasionally create mystical miracles."

After that, there was a long silence.

For some reason, this scenario reminded Kusla of the fortune telling, when melted lead was poured into water.

What shape of the scathing hot words from Irine take in this silence?

And then, he thought of something; that was not the case. His mind recalled Fenesis' innocent little question.

What would happen if lead was to change shape?

Whatever the fortune telling women did, Kusla did not know.

But he knew he himself was not the same.

That if he were to change into any shape, what would happen to him.

What was it that he wanted?

"You think you can do it?"

Irine gritted her teeth, saying this,

"Anyone in a blacksmith workshop who says he can't do it will be beaten up. So,"

She paused, and looked up.

"If you can't do it, it'll cause trouble for many. This is the workshop."

Irine's ex-husband was an outstanding talent who led Gulbetty's crafting guild, and Kusla was a little miffed that he did not have the skill to revive the dead.

But at the very least, he was still alive, and the one he wanted to protect was still alive.

The scenario was simply despair for him.

He had a change of thought. So what, right?

Heading towards Magdala was basically mocking the despair in the hearts of men.

For alchemists were people who worked to defy the order of the world.

"Hey!"

Kusla called out to irine,

"What?"

With a serious look, Kusla asked the blacksmith lady who was younger than him and a head shorter.

"Did you mention any of these to her?"

Irine widened her eyes, trying her best, and failing to make the smile vanish from her face. With such an intriguing smile, she said, "I might, if you dare do anything bad to little UI."

That stupid conversation they had might be Kusla's way of expressing his thanks to Irine.

His objective remained fixed. There were some things he did not know without others telling him. He too was shocked to have realized this.

However, only an honest girl like Irine would have been straight to the point with him.

Like smithed iron, she was adamant, fiery, direct.

Alchemists were relatively inapt at dealing with smelted metals.

However, the situation did not improve just because of this. Wishes alone

were unable to move big mountains. There was no possibility of this town accepting Fenesis, and the Knights' reinforcements would not come. It was likely all those related to the Knights all over the world were about to the exterminated.

Even if he did bring Fenesis along and escaped with the Knights, she would only be a tool to warm the beast, like those injured, imprisoned beasts.

Appearing before him would be a cruel, unforgiving devouring.

Then, what If they escaped into the forest? Or asked Weyland for help? Neither of them were realistic.

However, if he had been dejected because of how unpragmatic everything was, Kusla would have went knocking on the doors of a blacksmith.

He could do nothing, except to think.

But even so, that was all he can do.

"I was the one who kicked you down."

"Heh?"

Kusla forced a smile, saying,

"But this time, it's your turn to beat on my chest hard."

Then?

Irine's eyes wordlessly conveyed this reaction.

"Thanks."

The earnest girl gave a stunned smile, like an older sister.

Act 4

Thus, instead of choosing to meet the local clergymen, Kusla led Irine back to the workshop.

On the way back, he said, you are to tell her that, and at that moment, Irine gave an inscrutable look.

"Why are you never so honest when it comes to this?"

"I don't care about what you think of it, but if I am to talk to her, I will end up mentioning the last picture on the painting."

"…"

Irine stared at Kusla, digesting his words, and then sighed, haven't given up.

"Don't let little UI know about what the painting is about, well, I agree. Okay, I get it. I'll just tell her that you should have reflected on it somewhat after hearing me tell you off."

Kusla somehow ended up as a fool, but nothing good would happen even if he did nitpick simply to salvage his own reputation.

"Whatever. I'll leave it to you."

Kusla heartily accepted, and Irine, walking by his side, seemed displeased for some reason.

"What is it?"

Kusla questioned, and irine asked in irritation.

"Instead of caring about your own pride, you should be prioritizing little UI, right?"

Kusla shrugged.

"If it's correct, I'll do it."

"…"

Irine pursed her lips firmly, "Goodness me." sighed, and said,

"Only in such situations are you so direct. How sleazy you are."

"Huh?"

Kusla asked, but Irine did not comment further.

After Kusla brought irine back to the workshop, he went straight to the plaza.

In any case, no matter how Irine tried to convey his words, he could anticipate her reaction.

It was not an impossibility, but Kusla did not want to remain there when that happened.

And most importantly, what to do? At this point, he could not think of any solution.

After Irine had been hammering it over his head, Kusla thought about how to work together with Fenesis, but naturally, he could not think of any good idea. Something he found difficult to say, that he realized a long time back, was that staying at Gulbetty might have been a better option.

Rich finances. Authority to do anything in town. Personal safety.

The Southern countries had rose in arms to rebel against the Knights, and Gulbetty too should be involved, but at the very least, it probably was not as isolated as this frontline. There should be a few ways out.

At this point, all Kusla could only think of was to follow Alzen and break through the line, and then seize the opportunity to escape. Alzen and the others would be giving their all to escape, and would not be going out to chase down one after another. The problem was, for obvious existences like Kusla and Fenesis, could they wander in the Northern lands, and live on?

They could not escape to any village or town. Also, Kusla was not prolific in travelling, let alone hunting.

His eyes seemed to have seen that once the two of them escaped together, they would lose their way, and freeze in the forest.

"No good way out of this...?"

Kusla muttered, and another Kusla appeared in his mind, giving a pretentious

tone.

How can there be one?

The only way out, the only option, is to abandon Fenesis.

Or perhaps, you can offer Fenesis and Irine as a gift, and establish your positions amongst the Knights. Such was a cold, yet pragmatic decision.

But once he heard the voice of this 'Interest', Kusla was merely filled with rage.

He groaned as he stood in the plaza, and there was a change in the flow of the crowd.

And he immediately realized the soldiers fighting outside the town had retreated.

It seemed they had pulled back before their forces were overly depleted, and ended being a preparation for a retreat.

Alzen made his next move, intending to hold the fort from a breakthrough. This move was better than waiting for their demise, but would that be better than embarking on the journey towards death.

What to do? In reality, most decisions were not made based on experimentation. There was no accommodating option to keep trying until it worked. Thus, Kusla had been overly conservative in his way of life. There was only one Fenesis, a life could never be revived. One only lived once, opportunities were once in a million. He remained beside the fountain, racking his brain.

What should he do?

He appeared to be falling in the chaotic darkness, sinking into deep thought.

And while that happened, footsteps rang near him. Someone bent down and sat next to Kusla.

"...What?"

Kusla tersely replied. It was Weyland.

"That's my line~"

"Ah?"

"The mood in the workshop isn't for humans to live in, so I escaped~"

Irine probably informed Fenesis on what happened. Kusla could imagine what reaction that white maiden would have, and his nostril picked up on a faintly sweet scent of breasts.

"So cute she was, but being overly cute is driving me mad~"

Weyland said, and kicked at Kusla's boots.

"Go back to the workshop"

"Got other things to do."

If simply embracing Fenesis would allow him an idea, Kusla would have remained on her like a parent bird on its eggs.

But unforunately, something would be amiss if he was to remain with Fenesis or Irine. The name 'Interest' would melt along with Kusla's mind, like honey.

"Always the pragmatic one, Kusla~"

"Reality is too alluring. Can't look away."

Weyland looked defeated as he looked up at the sky.

"Don't you have any good ideas?"

"Probably no further than you are, Kusla~"

Weyland was not an incompetent, and neither was he someone who could not adapt quickly.

And as Kusla knew this well, he could not help but blurt out these words,

"Is it a mistake to come here?"

Once he said this, he found these words to be deflating. He could sense a slightly surprised look from Weyland, who was right by the side.

But Weyland did not answer him, and neither did he mock.

"If we're going by this reasoning, being born is already a grave mistake in itself~"

u n

Kusla looked over at Weyland, the perverse womanizing alchemist who had much history with him giving a deliberate hearty smile.

"You can leave those words for the gallows". Are the four of us still safe"? The fire in the furnace has yet to be completely extinguished"."

"... Never thought I would be encouraged by you."

"Same here. Never thought you would save me back in Gulbetty."

"Well, yes." Kusla could only respond tersely.

It seemed Weyland did feel he owed Kusla some gratitude, in his own way.

"But~"

"Huh?"

"Never thought you would succumb, Kusla. Little Irine did say that she convinced you."

Weyland looked at Kusla, the smile vanished from his face.

It seemed he had already heard from Irine.

"Well that's how it is."

Kusla simply admitted defeat,

Weyland appeared to be stunned for sure, but Kusla felt relieved about it.

"She went the long way around saying that since we're all going to die, the two of us can just die together, you know? Her mindset's just like a Princess. If that's her Magdala though, that's a lot more convincing."

"Ah." Weyland nodded away in agreement.

"it's surprising. No matter who is it, all the Magdalas are the same."

"Hm? That girl does have such a vibe". She may appear feisty, but she is considered a prim and proper lady"."

".....You serious?"

Kusla asked with skepticism, but Weyland merely shrugged.

Kusla felt he was no inferior to Weyland in terms of picking ores or smelting, but surely Weyland was superior with regards to women matters.

Even so, Irine was a prim and proper lady?

He could at least admit she was a good person.

"Speaking of which."

"Huh?"

"Things aren't going too well"."

Weyland slowly noted,

"Whether it's the current situation, and little UI."

"...Isn't this just reality?"

"Reality huh. In that case"."

Weyland leaned back, and looked up at a high place.

"If this is reality too, it does feel like there's a chance~"

Before his eyes was a dragon used as a part of the fountain, stationed at this place. Like what Alzen tried to lean on, if this dragon could spew flames, he would surely be able to dissipate this damned situation.

"Want to figure out a miracle to revive the dragon? It's like pouring mercury down the mouth of a dead chicken."

Kusla stifled a laugh as he said this, while Weyland continued to look up at this dragon statue with a strange posture, remaining still.

"Hey."

"...Maybe~"

"Huh?"

Kusla raised an eyebrow as he questioned, and Weyland merely murmured.

"Don't you find it strange that this is the only part that isn't real"?"

"What do you mean..."

Kusla said, agreeing with his view. The Orthodox seeing the paintings

depicting the origins of this town would most likely assume it to be ridiculous. As to be expected of foolish pagans.

But Kusla and the others already knew that people like Fenesis truly existed.

In that case, as Weyland had said, the notion that 'only the existence of dragons are unrealistic' did not seem right.

"No, but...in any case."

"Well, for sure there isn't an Orichalcum sword."

Weyland got up, and looked at Kusla,

"What if someone said that to you?"

Kusla was speechless.

But he was not agitated. Weyland looked really serious.

"You alright?"

"Very. No, more importantly, the real reason might be that there's no other way~"

Frivolous in tone, Weyland's eyes betrayed no smile.

You got to be joking, right? Kusla thought.

Dragons are supposed to be mythical. Nobody had ever seen them.

But Kusla noticed something amiss.

Nobody saw it?

If so, why do the creatures called dragons exist in all records since ancient times, and all of them depicted as spewing fire?

"Something does seem strange here"...I did look at the painting little Irine found...hm, it was the one cut away. Don't you find it similar?"

"Similar?"

Weyland stared intently at Kusla.

"Similar to the weapons and armor that great Herald had us inspect. In other words—"

"Ah!"

Only then did Kusla realize the similarity of those two.

In other words, the shape and sizes were completely matching.

"Since they are the tribe that had spread the smelting and extracting skills to this area, they probably had more abilities to offer. In that case, the dragon might..."

"But...even alchemists aren't be considered mages. Summoning a dragon from a laker linking to Hell is a delusion. The dragon's blood shall continue to burn, never to be doused by water, and able to stop time, cure ailments; it's foolish to hail such contents. That's—"

Saying this, Kusla was suddenly at a loss of words.

Weyland gave Kusla a perplexed look.

A dragon's blood was easily flammable, never extinguished when contact with water. When it is soaked in water, time seemed to stand still, and it's able to cure all ailments?

He seemed to have heard of such effects somewhere?

And appearing in his mind was one line in the 'Book of Dragon Blood'.

"If a dragon was hurt, the burned dragon blood would scatter, bringing calamity to humanity, and so on."

Kusla looked up at this dragon statue.

He felt something was amiss. Something seemed strange with those words.

No, the dragon statue was amiss to begin with.

Why did it look to be in agony as it looked up to the sky?

And the dragon's mouth was not spewing water—

"Blowing flames!?"

Kusla exclaimed without a second thought. Weyland widened his eyes, and some in the crowd frantically pacing across the plaza stopped in their tracks. Kusla did not mind however. Once he had an idea, he would be so tense, he

would forget to breathe until he had linked everything together.

The effects of dragon blood. That text in the book, and also, **The ones similar** to Fenesis depicted on the paintings.

"Kusla?"

Weyland called for him, but the latter did not respond, merely looking back.

His face slowly broke into a smile.

"There's no way we can try to revive the dragon."

He was smiling, for he could only smile.

"But if we can really get it to revive."

Kusla started breathing again, as though gulping.

"Don't you think a miracle will happen?"

The 'Book of Dragon Blood', and the words engraved in that hidden cave.

The Calamity of the flames of Hell would come upon those seeking it—

Kusla started running before he knew it. Weyland seemed to have some words to say, but he did not stop. They were headed to the workshop, and he shoved the door aside, rushing in.

Irine was seated by the bench at the work area, having started to learn words to alleviate the excessive uneasiness she had. At this moment, she jolted.

"W-what, what is it?"

Irine kept blinking away, but Kusla ignored her, and hurried into the inner room.

"Ah! Wait-!"

When he opened the door to the bedroom, he found Fenesis shriveled into a ball on the ball.

She gave her visitor a shocked look, one that lasted for seconds.

Once she saw that it was Kusla however, she was a little terrified, a little anguished, a little displeased, and seemed to bashful to look straight at him. Kusla averted his eyes from this Fenesis, pondering in his heart that if he was to

describe her with his lacking vocabulary...

A gripping expression.

Thus was the reason Weyland ran away.

But at this point, Kusla was looking for his bag, the book that was inside, the 'Book of Dragon Book' that was covered in black leather.

```
"E-erm."
```

Fenesis spoke, having seeming made up her mind.

But Kusla ignored her actions as he opened the black book, and flipped through the pages at frantic pace. It contained loads of common knowledge, long, monotonous content that left him sighing. The dragon landed on that hill, spewing flames that could be seen hundreds of yards away, before returning back to Hell, and such narration. Typical adults would never pay much attention to it.

However, the technical books left behind by alchemists were also commonly disguised as fortune telling or mythical books, recorded as anecdotes.

And thus, he read this book as such.

```
"..."
```

Kusla quickly closed the book. Once he knew the trick, the code within posed no challenge to him.

```
"Erm..."
```

At this moment, Fenesis spoke up, having finally made up her mind.

Kusla looked down at her, and she showed a teary face on the bed.

She had some things she had to say, but her emotions were the only things surging into her mind, and he really was at a loss of what to do.

And seeing Fenesis react this way, Kusla coldly responded,

```
"Stand up."

"Erm, ah...eh?"

"Stand up. Get ready."
```

""

Kusla glared at Fenesis.

"I need your help! Pack up and get ready!"

He raised his voice, for he was really angered, rather than the stunned look Fenesis showed.

However, he too was unsure if that anger was directed at Fenesis or himself. When he was wondering what Fenesis was doing on the bed, he never expected her to see the Mother figure and the emerald pendant she had been rubbing. This alchemist, dubbed 'interest', was left wondering as to what expression he should show when facing such a girl. Should he not bellow when he was being irate, no?

Kusla clicked his tongue, leaving behind Fenesis in the bedroom as she was clearly flustered yet moving along as he returned to the workshop. Weyland too returned, "Hey Kusla~" he called out, and was silenced by the 'Book of Dragon Blood' thrown at him.

"Hm? This is?"

"The book I found in the abandoned mines. Probably something sealed behind the hidden doors. Those people raiding that place don't know its value and just threw it aside."

Weyland gave a few glances at the front and back of the cover, and slowly opened the pages.

"But this book is most likely the one in this town that should be most sealed up."

Kusla said, and heard teetering footsteps from the bedroom, as Fenesis scampered out.

"So-sorry. Kept you waiting."

The emerald pendant was swaying before her chest, probably as she was overly anxious.

"Showing such a thing so openly is basically asking for others to attack you!"

Fenesis was met with a cold stare from Kusla and a reprimand, and she hastily tried to hide the pendant inside her clothes, but as her clothes were overly thick, she was not too successful. Kusla sighed, naturally reached his hand for the Mother's figure in her hand, opened her collar, and stuffed it it.

For a moment, she appeared to be at a loss as of how she would be treated, but when she recovered, she held her chest down, blushing as she retreated.

"What can you do, hiding that flat chest of yours?"

One could see Fenesis' ears prick beneath the veil.

She lowered her chin, and pouted, glaring at Kusla with a teary look, and aside in annoyance.

Rather than being watched with a gripping expression, Kusla felt more at ease to be treated with annoyance.

And then, his eyes were directed at Irine, who was completely oblivious as to what was going on.

"You, come along too!"

"Eh? Me?"

"And Weyland too. Get a larger hammer and chisel, or something similar. I'm guessing we need some manual labor."

"Hm? Well, if you say so~>"

Weyland replied, and slowly trotted to the various tools placed in a corner of the workshop.

Irine remained seated on the chair, slightly dazed as she suddenly spoke up,

"You thought of something?"

Kusla tersely responded.

"We're going to affirm that."

They were headed to the Cathedral in the ruins of the mines.

They scaled the ruins of the mines to the entrance of the Cathedral, and there were numerous soldiers stationed there, watching the enemy camp.

Once they found Kusla and the others, they were all left shocked in unison, but did not say much.

They probably had no idea who Kusla's team was, and that the reality they had witnessed at that place was so cruel, it trivialized this matter.

From this position, it was obvious how much Kazan was surrounded.

It was one such that Alzen would be forgiven for reacting as such.

"Let's go."

But if Kusla's guess was correct, even that enemy formation could be easily beaten back.

They went down the old sewer, and arrived at the Cathedral with the dragon statue.

"...Amazing."

Irine let out an impressed cry, but Kusla quickly gave instructions.

"Hey, watch the entrance and see if there's anyone coming from the top."

Irine pointed at herself, and wordlessly agreed.

"I'll call for you when it's your turn. You're the lead here!"

Kusla said as he unveiled Fenesis' head.

"Hyaa!"

The snowy white beast ears had nowhere to hide as the light shone in from the top.

"Get down, now."

"...Eh?"

Fenesis remained rooted, having assumed that she was mistaken. Kusla repeated.

"I said to get down."

"..."

"Knees on floor, keep your body low."

What kind of joke is this, Fenesis' face implied, but Kusla showed no change in his expression, and she finally realized that he was serious.

She lowered her ears in fear, her knees landing on the floor apprehensively as she crouched before Kusla. Appearing at this point was a blueprint to incite people to poke at her and bully her.

Irine, watching the entrance, noticed the two of them, and raised her voice panickedly.

"Wa-wait, what are you doing!?"



```
"Quiet."
```

Without looking at Irine, Kusla answered,

"If you don't keep quiet, she can't hear."

"Ah?"

Kusla leered as he ignored Irine.

"Prick your ears and listen clearly."

Once Kusla said this, Weyland realized his intentions, and chuckled.

"Now then."

He gently raised his right foot.

"If there's a strange echo, that's the entrance to Hell."

With a thud, he tapped on the stone floor with his heel.

Even for those proficient in raiding, those were simply humans. Their hearing has a limit to how good they were.

But if they were Fenesis, who had unhuman ears.

From the myth recorded in the 'Book of Dragon Blood', Kusla deduced that the Cathedral might have a hidden room. Thus, Weyland and him had been knocking all over the stone floor. Fenesis immediately understood her mission, and confidently brought her ears to the floor.

Soon after, she got up in a jolt,

"Over there."

Fenesis pointed at a certain spot without hesitation, in a way that lacked thrill.

It was that massive dragon statue.

"In that case, Weyland, your turn."

"Eh? Me~?"

"You pulled a fast one on me during that lead fortune telling, didn't you? Acted like you did so for the first time."

u n

You're still talking about that? Weyland had such a look, but he probably had some conscience as he raised a hammer, its handle almost as tall as he was.

"But don't you feel some guilt at all~?"

"That's an unnecessary emotion for an alchemist."

"Got to hand it to you, Kusla~ go~"

Weyland raised the hammer, and slammed it on the dragon statue.

A loud sound rang, and shrapnel scattered, but only some cracks formed.

"This really is more hassle than I thought..."

Weyland said, and slammed the hammer over and over again.

The dragon statue showed cracks, shrapnel falling, on the verge of breaking apart.

Fenesis was probably terrified about the fact that they were destroying a magnificent statue, as she dusted her clothes as she watched on with a frozen look. Irine too approached the entrance of the Cathedral, looking conflicted at what they were doing, only to let out a little cry as she tumbled over.

"What are you doing?"

It was the soldiers, who panicked as they heard the commotion, hurrying over as they pushed her down.

However, Weyland merely glanced aside, and ignored them as he swung another strike. The hammer was then swallowed into the belly of the dragon, with a blunt sound different from before. Due to that, the cracked parts collapsed like dominoes, giving rise to a cloud of dust along with the shrapnel.

And everyone present had their eyes fixed.

At the back of the collapsed statue.

A certain 'creature' was there.

"W-wah, wahhh!!"

Shrieking and tumbling onto the floor were the soldiers.

Kusla saw that Irine was completely overwhelmed, unable to cry out.

And Fenesis subconsciously tugged at his sleeve.

That thing glared at the unruly intruders from the back of the statue.

Striking Kusla and the others later was not simply a look of fear.

"[?"

The first to retreat was Weyland, and after a beat, the anomaly reached where Kusla and the others were standing.

The first to panic were the terrified soldiers.

"I-it's a miasma! Toxic gases from the mines!"

Man, armed with some half-baked knowledge, would only have their fear amplified.

But despite so, there was truly a stench. It was a unique smell, like rock being cut up.

The only one covering her nose and not knowing what to do was Irine.

Kusla and Weyland knew what that was, and Fenesis appeared to have realized something, "This smell...is it...?"

She looked up at Kusla, muttering.

Weyland again swung the hammer down, enlarging the hole, and moved the rubble aside.

A stinging stench filled the hole, and something akin to a large bear was sprawled all over the floor.

"How magnificent!"

A few dragons were hidden there.

Wrong, it should be said to have the appearance of a dragon, akin to the replica seen at the plaza.

"Irine, your turn."

Kusla instructed Irine while she had tumbled to the floor in shock.

"You're going to investigate the dragon corpse, as for us,"

He showed a sneer, pausing his words,

"We're going to investigate the dragon blood."

Saying that, Kusla took a step forward, only to have Fenesis tugging at his sleeve, stopping him.

She looked up at him apprehensively, but when their eyes met, she hastily let go.

"I won't be going anywhere."

Kusla put his hand on hers.

"Wait here for a moment."

Once her head was patted a few times, Fenesis shrank back, and seemed to have something to say, only to remain quiet.

Together with Weyland, who merely shrugged at this, they entered the room behind the statue.

It was a room with a high ceiling, so high that neight of them could reach even with their arms raised. There were six dragon statues there.

Some were lacking in body parts, while others were contorted.

"Wounds from the war, huh?"

Weyland muttered, and stopped once he spotted something.

"What is it?"

Kusla stood beside Weyland, and he too gasped.

Leaning on the wall were two sets of skeletons that had been long deceased.

"...Don't say anything."

Kusla merely muttered, and went deep into the room to search for his target.

Weyland watched the skeletons, and then followed Kusla.

The two skeletons seemed to be leaning on each other.

Their clothes were gone with the wind, but that unique shape was

distinguishable. They had ball and shackles chained on the feet. It was likely they were the deformed who were sealed along with the dragons.

"Weyland."

Kusla had descended the stairs deep inside the room, and called for his partner's name.

And soon, he arrived at his side, before giving a whistle.

"Want to try dropping a candle accidentally now~?"

"No way."

Kusla tersely responded.

Before them was a lake darker that darkness.

A brief touch on the toes would show that it was no ordinary water. It was a fluid more viscous than that, so much that it was similar to the hatred and malice of humanity.

"So this is the true identity of the dragon blood?"

Weyland said, totally taken aback by this.

Dragon blood would bring about the flames of hell, and on the other hand, was effective against countless ailments. All that sank in it would avoid the shift of time.

It was an omnipotent existence, so befitting of a rural pagan's thoughts.

But what if it was written as something so mythical, a deliberate hyperbole?

It was no wonder Kusla had some familiarity with these words.

What triggered the saying that it would ignite the flames of hell, was simply the flammability. Whatever description that it was able to cause countless ailments, it meant that it could be used on certain diseases. That anything immersed in it would not be affected by time, in other words, could be considered 'preservation of meat'.

Kusla realized that the dragon blood exhibited such characteristics.

From the crucial description of the flames of Hell, he was able to affirm this

answer.

This dragon blood referred to asphalt, the oil from rock.

Such oil was extremely rare to find, such that it appeared the only place to extract it would be at Fenesis' birthplace, the distant desert area.

Anyone seeing such a thing for the first time would surely be utterly terrified.

Because it was easily flammable.

Also, it would create black smoke, giving the impression that the world was about to end.

If such a thing was fired from the mouth, such a ghastly scene it would be.

Such was the mechanism behind this legend of the dragon.

"Now then, time to wake up the sleeping dragon."

Kusla said, and turned around to leave.

Irine finally recovered, and thoroughly inspected the metal dragon, from the damaged parts to the inner structure.

At this moment, the Knights themselves had arrived, probably having received intel from the terrified soldiers.

What surprised Kusla was that Alzen was amongst them.

However, that face did not seem to have understood much.

He probably wanted to rely on anything, if possible.

"What is going on here?"

"As you can see."

"Wha."

Alzen stopped in his tracks upon seeing the glare from the dragons behind the damaged statue.

However, he cleared his throat, as though remembering that he could not make a joke of himself before his subordinates, and straightened his back.

"The legend of the dragon is the real thing."

u 11

"We are currently investigating this. Most likely...the dragon being able to spew fire is a weapon."

"Weapon..."

"There is a fountain at the plaza, no? Something like that."

As Irine said, the statue at the plaza clearly looked to be in pain. It was no wonder, for the dragon itself was supposed to be prone on the floor, its mouth opened.

"B-but, so what? Using a fountain as a weapon is..."

"Of course, a fountain exudes water, but what if the water is flammable?"

Kusla sneered.

"Archduke Kratol did ask of alchemists to do some fire breathing, no?"

This is the same thing.

Upon hearing Kusla's words, Alzen remained silent.

Irine then walked out form the hole, probably aiming to end the conversation.

"I had a look, and it does seem to be the case. There is something like an intricate bellow. The function, I believe, is probably the technology similar to the fountain."

"Is it possible to use them?"

"There are two that seen completely fine. They are made using extremely pure bronze, pretty like they were made last week. Also, if we can get spare parts from another one, we can rebuild one or two. This though, I don't know if I can do it. If it's just me, manpower-wise, it won't be enough. Also, this place really stinks..."

Given that she could still grumble, surely she had somewhat calmed down.

Kusla nodded, and looked towards Alzen,

"That's the situation. What do you intend to do? I'm guessing this can scare the pagans more than pouring mercury into a dead chicken. At this point, we can extract asphalt from the lake deep inside, scatter them all over the enemy, and set them aflame. We won't have to take the bloody path out, but a path of flames.

Alzen was still sceptical of whatever happening before him, his eyes fixated unflinchingly on the 'dragon corpse'.

But he was truly the man acting as Herald of the Knights.

He took a deep breath, his eyes glimmering with light again.

"I shall discuss this with the Archduke."

"Meaning?"

"We can gamble on this miracle. Alchemists, show us your abilities, and prove yourselves to be above money-grubbing worms."

Kusla then nodded slowly, answering,

"Of course, but we have a condition to this assistance."

"Which is?"

"A safe departure. Promotion after this is all over, and a workshop befitting our status assigned to us."

""

Alzen stared at Kusla, surely weighing various options in his mind. Even though the 'dragon corpse' and asphalt were there, without the assistance of Kusla's team, any ordinary person would probably light the asphalt like a torch and shoo away the enemies like wolves.

"Certainly." Alzen nodded,

"As I swear upon my name, Alzen, I shall assure your safety on the journey, and whatever happens after. However..."

"However..."

"The premise is that we can make it out safely."

Kusla nodded courteously, and answered,

"As you wish."

He then turned towards the others,

"You heard him."

Weyland stroked his chin, sneering away. Irine had her hands on her hips, "Who died and mad eyou king?" grumbling away.

Finally, Fenesis watched Kusla with sadness for some reason, but Kusla ignored her, and looked towards Alzen again.

"I suppose time is of the essence now?"

"Naturally."

And so, Kusla and the others got down to reviving this ancient technology, to harken a miracle in this tribulation.

Escaping from Kazan was a completely different matter from a skirmish at the entrance of the town.

Also, the enemy did have contact with the residents living inside the town, and appeared to have realized the Azami's Crest intentions to escape. They attacked the walls, and started firing arrows into the town to disperse.

For the craftsmen and merchants who came along with the Azami's Crest, even if they did escape from this town, they had no future awaiting them. They came to Kazan, hoping to have work here, and even if they were transferred to a new town with authority secured, it was likely that they would only suffer more than usual.

Thus, the enemy forces outside the walls fired arrows containing letters that wrote: No matter the truth to the matter, we have no intention of harming non-combatants. Once the town revives, we shall accept these people as new citizens. The only condition is to be enemies against the Knights.

Within the walls of the town, there were spies sharing information with the enemies outside. If the people inside the walls were to fawn over the Knights, they would have no way to deny once the Knights left Kazan.

But the Knights, despite their inaptitude, were still the Knights, not opponents that could have swords drawn at their necks.

The town was filled with uneasiness, as though immoral tempered clergymen

had falsified that they were abandoned by God, all to spread the faith.

There was nobody, nothing, that was worth believing, to be tested. All of them worked only for their own benefits.

If this situation was to collapse, all that was needed would be some trivial opportunity.

If they were to remain in the tense atmosphere the entire time, they might be driven insance.

One could count their lucky stars if there was work to be done.

"Does this refer to pine resin? Then this magic powder to burn the water is quicklime...after that is sulfur, phosphorus, and mercury..."

"Sounds dangerous. How much for each?"

"Not written in here. Looks like we can only sample with a few. Hey! You there! Don't approach the asphalt while holding the fire!"

The siege battle continued over the walls again, and the mercenaries banded together to prevent riots in town. Most of the craftsmen did not offer assistance, probably worried of the consequences, and the revival of the dragon was basically done by Kusla's team.

They had all their torches in the Cathedral, and the craftsmen who had decided to cast their lot with the Knights were gathered, analysing the corpse of the damaged dragons, checking the internal structure.

And to ensure that the asphalt extracted from the underground lake would burn most efficiently, Kusla continued to read the 'Book of Dragon Blood', and Weyland would experiment.

Once he had ascertained the method, Weyland would repeat experiments based on his instincts. When he knew he could not gain any new information from Kusla, he would scowl, his expression telling Kusla not to bother him.

Kusla then had a look at Irine. She had an extraordinary ability to assemble a bellow that worked along with the water wheel, loved to research, and her desire to experiment might not be inferior to Weyland, no, even exceeds his. At the very least, she was previously the leader of a blacksmith guild, and she

continued to work like a veteran, even when she was involved with others who were taller than her, or at least double her age.

Kusla suddenly found that the Cathedral in the ruins of the mines had become a massive workshop.

Everyone followed their assignments, and did whatever they were tasked with. Though jumbled up, they all had a common goal.

Of course, dividing the work was not some rare thing, for blacksmiths would do the same in workshops. Sometimes, merchant goods like clothes would require years of journey, arrivals at various workshops in various countries, before the final product was made.

But for Kusla, who had always worked alone, this was a refreshing, intriguing experience.

This first experience could simply be said as united as one.

He felt abnormally lethargic, yet strangely refreshed, and snorted.

Laughing at himself, for having no right to criticize Fenesis for going blind seeking solace.

Alchemists all sought the same goal, to head towards Magdala, but every one of them governed themselves, And thus, as nobody could trust anyone, just the notion of working together with others would be scorned upon. Kusla too had firmly believed that working alone suited him most, that it was the most polished way of doing things on this world.

But reality seemed a little complicated, and there were some things that would have remained unknown without experiencing.

This wasn't a bad thing.

Kusla felt a little lethargic, and leaned on a wall, realizing at this moment that his posture was akin to surrender.

"...What?"

While he was quietly mocking himself, a nun stood before him.

She had already learned how to find work for herself, scampering everywhere

to do menial chores, and got herself all covered in soot, dust and sweat. At this point, Fenesis went from being a pure white nun to a grey rat.

The grey rate then spoke up,

"Are yo okay?"

Kusla assumed she was questioning the pace of the working.

"Probably. Weyland's a fanatic at research, and Irine does seem experienced in commanding others. Maybe we can modify a bellow and exude asphalt instead of air. Not a bad construct. That sort of thing should be built easily."

Kusla commented as he watched the workers scurry around like ants and bees, but awaiting him were the somewhat angry stare reom the pretty green eyes.

"Please have some rest."

"Huh?"

Before Kusla could answer, Fenesis had already approached him, and remained by his flank.

"You are not looking good."

"..."

It seemed she intended to lend her shoulder, and bring Kusla over to a certain place.

"You are wrong here. It's an ugly scheming face now, isn't it?"

Saying that, Kusla wanted to nudge Fenesis aside, but the grey rate nun remained obstinate.

"You always told me not to force myself."

Truly, I did. So Kusla thought.

In fact, ever since they departed on the long journey from Gulbetty, he did not sleep much, and kept toiling away.

He was almost at his limits. A certain part in his mind understood this well.

"...But I cannot just go to sleep by myself."

Kusla said without much thought, and even he was taken by surprise.

He cared about the feelings of others.

The unity displayed in this massive workshop was clearly reflected upon him.

"Also,"

Fenesis' words grounded Kusla back to reality.

"I too had such a thought before, but I did accept your advice to rest."

The girl's words were completely correct.

But Kusla still refuted.

"I am the Restless Alchemist."

"I heard that is just a description."

Fenesis' rebuttal left Kusla chuckling in bemusement.

"I get it, I get it. But walking back to the workshop is troublesome..."

"There is fire outside. Can you make your way there?"

"Don't put me on the same level as you."

Kusla did state so clearly, but Fenesis leaned on his flank, trying to support him, and they both walked down the sewer. There were torches everywhere, for people to move back and forth, and thus no worry about a lack of lighting.

But when they were slightly afar from the Cathedral, the buzzing from before seemed so distant.

"...It got quiet."

Kusla muttered without a thought.

"No turning back. Please have a little rest here."

Fenesis said with seriousness. Truly she was a stubborn busybody of a nun.

Kusla was not exactly a hindrance to the work at this point, but an alchemist sought to see reality, and grasp it. He knew very well whether they needed him there.

"I won't be going back. Even without me managing, it's likely to finish well."

Fenesis looked up at Kusla in surprise, probably stupefied by how understanding he was.

"I used to think that working in groups was just a method those blacksmiths would do for their boring jobs...but now they are using on the dragon-shaped flamethrowers. Quite a masterpiece."

Once they went from the sewer to the outside, a chilling cold, one about to rip their bodies apart, struck them. However, there were no clouds in the night sky, and the stars filling the sky were like silver powder scattered around.

Prompted by Fenesis, Kusla sat by the fire. She did not sit down immediately, went off somewhere, and returned with a large pile of blankets in hand. It was likely the soldiers keeping watch had prepared them; they were no longer in sight, either as they were in the Cathedral, patrolling around the town, or might be fighting against the enemies at the walls. Nobody could be certain as to whether they remained alive.

"Good work there. You can head back to work."

With the blankets draped over his body as he remained by the fire, his fatigue creeped in like melting ice.

Of course, this was the worst place to be sleeping in, but so tired he was that he did not mind.

"No, I want to stay here."

Kusla was about to close his eyes, but Fenesis insisted on his side. He gave her a look of annoyance.

She did not look straight at Kusla, but at the fire, in a somewhat petulant manner.

"During a journey, those travelling together will lean on each other for warmth."

Saying that, Fenesis was sitting down, beyond the blanket Kusla had wrapped around. She probably had another reason to stay behind.

But as he was too weary, Kusla's mind could not function as usual. He had a vague idea, not completely, of what Fenesis intended to do.

In any case, as it was too troublesome for him, he had her petite body lumped along with his beneath the blanket.

"I know that much common sense at least...or rather, both of us should be naked."

It would be warmer to have two people naked in embrace rather than be in clothes under the blanket. This was not an excuse to the Church, and though strange, it was fact.

But as he said it to her ears beneath the veil, he scented upon ash and asphalt, rather than the usual scent of breasts.

Was it because of this? Fenesis retorted.

"... That is the case, but it is crude coming from your ears."

"I want to sleep."

Kusla himself nearly fell asleep amidst the conversation.

"If you have something to say, do you mind hurrying up?"

Fenesis could not hide whatever was on her mind, probably due to this personality of hers. Kusla was peeved that he was one outwitted by this Fenesis, but she remained apprehensive.

From her actions, it seemed she had finally made up her mind.

The contact made between both bodies explained many things.

"It is about...what I heard from Miss Irine."

"Hmph."

Guessed so. Kusla snorted.

"Sh-she said that...you would...bring me along."

He did not know how Irine conveyed his message to her.

But the reaction she showed was enough to get Weyland running from the workshop.

In fact, she harbored some expectations, but could not spit it out. Thus, she was really elated. She however was obviously a handicap, and was perturbed by

this. Yet she was so elated.

Probably.

This might be the actual reason as to why Weyland chose to escape.

And thus, Kusla sensed that if he was present, he would be more annoyed than usual, or even have goosebumps.

But when he heard her summon her courage to say this, what he felt was not disgust, an urge to nudge her aside.

"Strangely, I find that working together in a workshop isn't a bad thing."

And also, he was reminded of a possibility, that instead of living on alone, he might bet on a method so that neither of them would die. As Irine had said, clumsily committing to the right thing would always be better than committing the correct mistakes.

Hearing Kusla's words, Fenesis' neck shrank. She acted as though her heart was shot by an arrow.

He reached his arm out and wrapped it around her shoulder. Fenesis' body shivered, probably due to sensitivity. The biggest joy alchemists have was in obtaining the reactions of various things, and the bigger the reaction, the better.

Fenesis' head drooped, and with his other hand, Kusla lifted her chin slightly.

The sudden change in situation had Fenesis frozen in place, and she seemed to have something she wanted to say, only to become silent once she saw his deliberate smile.

She was so terrified, yet she did not resist.

Have I become a vampyre now? Such a notion left Kusla chuckling again, and he approached the soft Fenesis, intending to leave his mark on her.

At that moment.

"Do you mind doing that later~?"

Separating the two of them was a piece of parchment.

And the voice stopping them down the middle was Weyland's voice.

Even Irine could be seen hanging around.

"Hm? Eh! Ah, goodness, Mr Weyland, why are you stopping them?"

"I won't do so if you're willing to be my partner, little Irine"."

"Huh? No way. Besides, you licked some asphalt, didn't you? What are you intending to do with that mouth?"

"Maybe that will create some fiery love affair"."

The bickering between both sides was similar to partners who had collaborated over many years. Also, other blacksmiths followed them out from the back.

All of them were holding various tools, while Weyland was holding a few vials, containing not wine, but asphalt.

"That's how it is. We're going to experiment. Come help out too~."

Kusla narrowed his eyes, and sighed.

"Can't the luck last a little longer?"

He said to Fenesis before him, and her eyes remained closed, as she said with a teary face, "...Pl-please let go of me..."

She was blushing. Kusla let go of her chin, and she, already exposed in an embarrassing state, crouched down.

He shrugged, suppressed his urges to sleep with the last of his strength, and got up, "Now then, time to start with the experiments. We'll continue next time"

He teased. Having been told off so directly, a dumbfounded Fenesis looked up at Kusla in rage, "Goodness, you..."

"Hm?"

"Nothing at all!"

Fenesis was fuming, as she pulled the blanket aside, and stood up.

But she did not leave Kusla's side.

She was practically declaring her position.

Irine and the other blacksmiths were assembling the heart of the dragon. It was assembled through the connection of cylindrical metal pipes between several control valves and drivers.

"The basic structure isn't a difficult one. Just put the asphalt high up, and the spout at the bottom. Using the weight of the fluid itself, the force would cause the fluid to spout. That's the same theory as a fountain. If you want to increase the distance, you will have to add pressure, similar to a bellow structure, and open the control valve. The shape of the dragon is also logical. By using that posture, the backside containing the asphalt will be high up, and the shape of the wings perfectly mimics the effects of a bellow. The reason why the wings are added is because of their length, that the lever physics is at well. It does appear that those people who made this had a logical yet adventurous thought process behind it."

Irine explained coherently. As to be expected of a capable blacksmith.

Though she had many reasons to be gloomy in Gulbetty, the biggest reason remained that her outstanding ability would never be satisfied in the rigid workshop of the town.

"That asphalt, according to the allocation of materials in the 'Book of Dragon Book', will have a massive change in flammability. The stickiness is the toughest issue to do it."

"Stickiness? Seems like it'll fly further if it's as dilute as water though."

Kusla said, and Weyland shrugged.

"If it's that sticky, it'll stick on the enemy and cause quite a tragedy, no?"

"...I see."

It was a weapon designed to kill.

"To get it flying far, there's a certain level of stickiness needed to increase the effect; but at the same time, the mechanism is more likely to be jammed. If there's too much resin and sulfur, the flammability will decrease. The best ratio isn't stated in that book, so I guess it's through word of mouth."

And the ones who knew the ratio were probably hidden in the dark corner behind that statue, silently leaning upon each other, awaiting their final moments.

"So that's how it is. At the very least, we are done with preparations"."

Weyland poured out the last bits of the contents in the vial. Irine received the flint from Kusla, and lit the firewood at the bottom of the device.

"This really is scary, but we need to heat it and soften it"."

Weyland explained with enthusiasm. With all her focus, Irine watched the heart heat up.

"Once you hear some slight knocking coming from the inside, that means it's just right. I'm guessing the inside will explode if you continue to heat it up"."

Irine heard Weyland's explanation loud and clear, and watched the heart intently.

And then, without anyone speaking up, she slowly nodded.

"I think it's good."

Saying that, she put a hand on the bellow that could exert pressure on the contents.

"So, who's going to wake the dragon up?"

All the eyes were naturally directed to Kusla.

"Me?"

"Well, you're the one who found it."

"...Feels like I am set up to be villain here."

"It's true that we'll never be able to step on these lands again"."

Kusla looked aside at Weyland, and snorted.

He placed his hand on the bellow.

"Don't exert too much force. If this breaks, this place will end up a sea of fire."

The words describing the injured dragon probably referred to this.

Also, these lands being rich in minerals would describe the shattered scales of the dragon, and that the dragon's body was created from the materials obtained from the mines. That was not wrong, in any case.

"Better to die in an experiment than at the execution platform."

Irine shrugged, and held a lit piece of wood before the metal tub. This was to lit the asphalt sputtering out.

"Isn't it better to shoot at the asphalt rather than have the wooden touch it?"

"So, the flames of hell. The Devil's threat won't be effective if they see this before their demise, huh?"

"Such a terrible joke."

Irine said, and retreated.

With everyone watching, Kusla gave a few presses on the bellows, felt that he had the pressure needed, and pulled the valve.

"|"

At that moment, the air expanded. A sun appeared before them, creating a blazing rainbow. Everything happened in a split moment, and there was no time to be terrified, marvel, or show any emotion.

A few seconds passed, and there was some lingering heat, such that one would wonder if the skin was burned off the face, and that the demon of flames just shot off in a straight line. It was quite some distance, and the asphalt burned far away, that even in the darkness, black smoke could be distinctively identified.

Once they realized what was going on before them, the emotion everyone present had was probably not shock.

From their eyes, the guilt over reviving such a vicious technology was clear for all to see.

And also, there was another feeling, one similar to excitement.

With this weapon, surely they would overwhelm the enemy, and break through the siege.

Such a weapon was the Devil's trick, so they say.

"Those people at the Church will pass out upon seeing this thing."

The legendary dragon regained life here.

After that, all they had to do was to assemble the dragon again, adjust the proportion of the asphalt, ready their forces, and time the moment to break out of the town.

Seeing how the attacks kept coming, the commotion within the town walls were at its breaking point.

Even the people who came along with the Azami's Crest had started to realize that the Knights were already the losers; a pervasive notion was that a riot would not be unexpected, even amongst those harbouring hopes and supporting the Knights.

Of course, there were those original residents who hoped for the town to be of old. The situation was volatile, and they had to act fast.

Weyland, irine, Kusla and Fenesis were already at their physical limits, yet they continued to toil through the night.

However, it was better than dying. It was better than giving up on their dreams.

With that as fuel, they continued to work.

However.

That only lasted until they managed to repair the second dragon that remained, the one that incurred relatively little damage.

Kusla frowned as he had a terrible migraine, probably due to the excessive fatigue, or the scent of the asphalt. At that moment, a soldier called for him.

"I am here on Lord Alzen's orders."

"...if you are asking about the progress, we'll make it, as I have reported."

Kusla could not hide his anxiety, his tone clearly conveying disdain.

"No."

However, the soldier whispered.

"WE have a problem."

Kusla looked back at the soldier. This soldier did not have much gruffness to him.

He had a thin, long face, and an apt description would be that he was someone in a position to order others, akin to Alzen and the others.

"Please call the other alchemist over."

"...Seems like it'll be a bad thing for you to be spotted. Wait for us inside."

Kusla pointed at a passage, which led to the room containing the offertory instruments, and the 'Book of Dragon Blood' he discovered in. The soldier looked over at where he pointed, and nodded slightly, fidgeting around as though he was looking for something as he passed through the blacksmiths, and quickly vanished at the other end.

Kusla watched him, and muttered to himself, now why did he come alone? In any case, surely it was not a good thing.

He steeled himself for this.

And so, he called out for Weyland, before both of them headed to that room separately.

Weyland entered first, followed by Kusla.

And the mood there left him smiling.

"I'll start with the conclusion."

The soldier said,

"We have insufficient asphalt."

Kusla looked over at Weyland, who then scowled unhappily.

"I did not waste it"."

"If we can have a little more time, perhaps it might be a little better..."

"But what do you mean insufficient? That lake isn't as big as it looks, but we managed to obtain quite a fair bit."

"I did some calculations based on the asphalt used in the experiments and the burning radius."

The soldier said, and took out a parchment from within his leather armor.

There was an illustration of a dragon on it, along with lines from the dragon, people, and numbers labelled by their side.

At that moment, Kusla finally understood.

The story of the dragon was not about reviving magic.

It was thoroughly based on reality; a mere drop or two of asphalt would not be able to burn everything before them.

Considering the size of the enemy camps and the numbers, we need three times our current supply to prevent the enemy from charging in. of course. If we want to burn them all to crisp, we'll need an astronomical amount."

It might be fine enough if the battle happened in a narrow valley, where the flow of attack was limited.

However, the land outside Kazan was vast, let alone a creek or a forest.

Even with three dragons assembled, the range a dragon could deal with was limited, and the asphalt would be fired in a straight line rather than scattered.

"Of course, this is just a calculated result, and the idea is that the enemy are wooden puppets who will not fear. In fact, humans aren't, and should be terrified of fire..."

"But by that definition, since they aren't wooden puppets, they will figure out that as long as they don't stand before the dragon, the fire won't be that scary."

"That's how it is."

The reaction of the enemy was unpredictable.

And Alzen was not charmed by the dragon, thought of it as a weapon, analysed the outcome, and deduced that they had insufficient asphalt.

"The purpose of a retreat isn't to wipe out the enemy. If we can do so, there's no need to retreat. The important thing is to ensure that they realize it's pointless to pursue, that they know even if they did, major losses would be

incurred."

"So?"

Asking at this point was Kusla.

Alzen and the others stood on ground facing direct danger, as compared to the alchemists.

Even after the calculations, it was the case. They lacked asphalt. Was there an alternative method?

They were not people who would be satisfied with an outcome.

They had used all the tools at hand, and did whatever they could do.

Kusla put himself in Alzen's shoes, wondering what would the latter do.

The typical way to retreat would be to scare the pursuers off. Even if the contents were empty, they could also befuddle the enemy, like turning lead to gold.

"I once saw you fool everyone at Gulbetty."

He used the word 'fool'.

But truly, it was an illusion, empty within.

"If we want to strike fear into those pagans who are thoroughly superstitious, we can make up for the lack of asphalt through fear."

"So deliver a strong blow right from the strat?"

"That's one possibility."

But that was not the answer. The soldier was trying to imply that it should be something to the effect of a stage performance.

:However, both of you have a tool that can be used."

The one tool most suited to terrify the pagans. Unexpectedly, the one to freeze up was Weyland. Kusla had predicted this, and watched the soldier.

"Do we have the right to refuse?"

Kusla asked, and the soldier lowered his gaze.

"Lord Alzen would never kowtow."

"...So you came in his stead?"

Kusla said, and Weyland looked over at him in shock.

The soldier, still looking fine, nodded slightly.

"Lord Alzen knows whose contribution this is. However, he does have a decision to make."

"Even if we do try to escape now, it's impossible now."

The soldier answered Kusla with silence.

But that was so.

Time was of the essence, and the crux here was that the tiger, no, dragon flamethrower was lacking in fuel.

In that case, they would need another weapon. One that would make upon for the terrifying flames, the lack of asphalt.

Naturally, they thought of this idea. The Knights had 'Fenesis' brought in from faraway lands, for this purpose.

"Please do understand that me being here is out of Lord Alzen's kindness, so that he would not impose his orders on you."

"But the situation hasn't changed."

Kusla grumbled.

He knew what they wanted, and he himself could not think of an alternative.

That dragon weapon could not be simply deemed as a weapon; surely there was a need to have it impressed as a creature summoned from Hell.

But it was not to say that there were no ideas.

The key was the painting Irine found.

"An archmagi to control the cursed ancient weapon, is that so?"

Kusla watched the soldier with suspicion.

"But isn't that girl too cute?"

That was his half-hearted attempt to refute.

"We are not the forces of evil, and neither are we noble. In this case, perhaps the epithet 'Holy Witch' would be more appropriate?"

Holy Witch.

That might be an epithet suited for Fenesis.

"Tomorrow, at dawn. Whether she will be riding on the dragon, or on a platform that can be stowed on a carriage, that will be for you two to decide. In any case, we hope for the both of you to present a splendid performance as you did in Gulbetty. Whether we can escape this will hinge on this."

The soldier boewed, and turned to leave.

Kusla stared at the empty wall, remaining still.

"Kusla."

Weyland called for his name.

"if there's anything you want from me, I'll assist your escape~"

Kusla looked over at Weyland in shock.

"Of course, that's not for you. It's for little UI."

Kusla had no idea how much Weyland said was real, but it might be.

However, he shook his head. It was surreal. If they wanted to survive, they would have to latch on to the Knights at all costs, and there was no other way."

Furthermore, there was another important matter.

"We'll use anything we can use, for our goal. That is an alchemist."

Kusla said.

Naturally, he should be using the girl as a cursed tool.

Fenesis and Irine had already returned to the workshop, so Kusla descended the hill, and head towards the workshop.

There were piles of fire rising on the other end of the wall, and the enemies could clearly be seen, but the battle was proceeding a little slowly. The Knights could not attack, and the enemy held their positions, waiting for the Knights to

charge out of the walls when dawn broke.

Kusla saw the enemy standing upright in the darkness, and sensed that three dragons would be insufficient for them to evade the enemy's ambush in the darkness.

And if they wanted to terrify the wits out of the thousands of enemies, they would have to rely not only burly muscles, or massive rods.

What the enemy feared were the slender arms of the king that were of no apparent use on the battlefield, and the staff used to swing.

Surely Fenesis' existence would come in play here.

There were a fair few of the enemy living in this town, and they would surely understand what had happened. The myths they believed in was real. Then, they would understand that it was baring its fangs.

The goal was clear, the outcome to be anticipated. Also, without a countermeasure on the enemy's part, the outcome was clear for all to see, even without a torch.

In that case, there was no reason not to use this move.

But what was he apprehensive over?

He stopped before the workshop. The light of the flame was leaking through the gap of the closed wooden door. There were a few surrounding workshops that had decided to assist the Knights, creating materials to revive the dragon. Amidst this, Kusla appeared to be someone brooding over the loss of his keys.

"Fool!"

Did he not decide to open the door leading to the hidden world of Truth, for the sake of Magdala?

Did he not swear, that he would do anything for the sake of this?

So Kusla convinced himself as he opened the door.

Like many things on this world, once one decided to open it, it would easily open. This fact that was open to them was something that could not be deemed as unprecedented.

The interior of the workshop was different from the outside, boiling with steam. There was a deep rumbling coming from the furnace.

Irine was nodding away, hugging a fire rake. Two other blacksmiths who appeared to be assisting her had fallen asleep.

He was quietly berating them over how careless they were, and found something on the work desk, shaped like dough, and a metal plate. That was the alarm clock he had taught Fenesis. Once the dough expanded, the plate would fall onto the floor. Surely it was something she had heard, and was using.

If she had remained by his side, they would be sharing knowledge like this.

Kusla went towards the bedroom inside.

He slowly opened the door, and the moonlight shone in through the gap of a chipped wooden window, with her basked under it.

It was a completely defenceless sleeping face.

It was a face of one without any tragedies on this world, only the ripened flowers, the doting birds, and the peaceful days awaiting her.

However, how much tragedy and hardship came upon this face was something Kusla could only deduce with all his might. It was a miracle that Fenesis was able to endure this Hell. And, something rare, was that despite all those encounters, she could still maintain such a defenceless sleeping face.

Kusla went to the bedside, and sat at the corner. When he took her in, she was still relatively naïve, pretentious, stubborn despite being weak, and a hopeless imbecile.

But at this point, she knew how to advance on her own, and sometimes surpassed Kusla when it came to this.

This town used to accept deformed people like her, and for her, that might be more important than those watching her with normal eyes. Were we always existences who were despised and ostracized by the world? For this question that was filled with despair, surely it could grant her an answer of hope.

What Kusla was about to say to Fenesis would shatter this hope completely. It was not something completely baseless, but a conclusion made by observing

the facts, analysing the situation, and seeing how everything aligned to this. He was about to inform her the definite reason as to why deformed people like her were ostracized and reviled by the world.

And then, he would have to tell her, someone so reviled and ostracized, to exert fear upon others.

Before Kusla discovered the secret of the dragon legend, he considered the options to survive, and one possibility was to offer Fenesis over. How was that different from what he was going to do? For the sake of living, he would have to hurt someone. Of course, he had made similar decisions till this point. Thinking back on how he lived, he knew that he would end up in Hell once he died. But at this point, he remained hesitant. Certainly, the one principle he harbored in his heart had collapsed completely. Where has the name 'Interest' gone to? Kusla asked himself.

It was likely that when he interacted with Fenesis and Irine, it dissolved away like sweets made of sugar.

Do you want to relax? Fenesis once said this to him.

And it ended up this way.

The old me was the right one after all, so Kusla thought.

He should not have opened up his heart towards others. He should have just kept low, remained skeptical, grit his teeth, and live his life. He should not know about the joys of the world he had never thought of.

"|"

Suddenly, he sensed something touching him. He gasped, and straightened himself.

He turned his head around, and found Fenesis staring wide eyed at him.

"...You awake?"

"I cannot just sleep by myself."

She smiled. Surely she did say those words to Kusla with some intent.

"Miss Irine told me to sleep..."

She sighed, her eyelids gently closing.

"But when it's too tiring...it's harder to sleep."

Or rather...Kusla had a thought.

Fenesis had experienced countless cruelty. Such experiences left her with an ominous vibe.

If that was not the case, surely that would not explain this predicament.

Fenesis' showed a strangely tender look.

"Miss Irine told me to sleep."

"What?"

Kusla asked.

But Fenesis gave a snicker, answering,

"She said you believe you hid your expressions well."

Such was the face of a woman. Such was the tone of a woman.

"Of course, you do let slip from time to time..."

Fenesis reached her hand out for Kusla.

"But when you do, it is often easy to understand."

""

"There is something you do want of me."

Such a wise lady.

No, this might be simply down to whether she was capable of it, or not.

Bottom line, it was an issue on experience. How many of such nights did Fenesis experience?

"You..."

Kusla spoke up, paused, and frowned.

He found himself to be utterly ridiculous.

He never realized his real self.

And surely, Kusla accepted his moniker 'Interest' (Kusla).

To establish an 'image', to proof that it was to be expected that he would not bother with how others felt.

"You."

Fenesis said,

"Are a kind person after all."

She chuckled, and gave a little sigh. The expression on her face clearly reiterated to Kusla that the latter could love.

"You wish for me to be the archmagi creating the dragon, yes?"

"How...did you...?"

"Fufu. Did you think I did not notice?"

Her gaudy smile had taken in so much anguish from the world, and yet so passionately depicted a nun preaching God's teachings.

"There were a few points in that painting, they looked unnatural."

"..."

"Miss Irine was careless. I always identified myself a cursed one, for the sake of living on, for the sake of every day. Once I heard anything unstable, I would associate it with myself. If not...my days would be the 'abyss of no return', as you said."

Fenesis prattled on as she fidgeted with a corner of Kusla's clothes.

"And your change of heart was too drastic."

Naturally, Weyland would not believe that Kusla was convinced by Irine.

In that case, why would he assume that Fenesis would be fooled? With a scowl, he had said that those know-it-alls would neglect many things, and come to the wrong conclusion.

Fenesis was no simple girl. He knew that well.

"So I thought something had happened. Everything else was simple. You probably found a reason why I cannot remain in this town. If that's the case, the

significance of that painting, and Miss Irine's words...will prove it. So I thought you might put me on a pedestal in this war. I am...a cursed tool after all."

She exhaled.

"But,"

She tugged at his clothes with more strength.

"You seem to be in anguish, and that delights me. You could have chosen to have thought of me as a simple tool, one to be discarded. In fact, the Knights who had reached out to me had already done so."

Kusla did not know how to react. It was as though he had encountered a miracle he did not know of, that he could only observe. For such a precious mineral, that was all he could only do.

"You said to be sure of the goal you set, and become stronger for this aim, no?"

Fenesis was no longer the one he first met.

She knew how to divert Kusla's words as material, and said with an angry tone.

"If you do intend to use me as a cursed tool, I do not mind."

Fenesis narrowed her eyes, as though the moonlight was stinging, as she continued, "For I am relying on you."

The girl who blindly sought her solace.

Yet she could not find that security.

"...But you are going to do something beyond what you imagine."

Kusla could not believe what he just said. He came to use Fenesis as a cursed tool, yet the words he said seemed to be restraining her.

And he understood this paradox well, yet he could not swallow his words.

"Lots of people shall die before you. You are that kind of thing."

Even without Fenesis activating it, even if it was for the sake of their survival, even though lots of people would die before their eyes. She would be the

representative of such an act.

Would Fenesis allow for such a thing to happen?

No, Kusla had another question. Was it fine to let her to it?

"Till this point, many have died."

That was Fenesis' answer.

"As I lived, many have lost their lives. Many have told me, at least you can continue to live on well. In fact, I did escape till this point, leaving them to die. The reason is that I do not wish to die; even if I had to watch them killed before me."

How many people on this world could say such words with such calmness?

"I have been told off by you many times. Not to be blind. The reason why I was blind was probably because I wanted to avert my eyes from these facts."

Fenesis let out a little sigh.

"But when the barbarians came attacking at Gulbetty, it was the first time I hoped for others, not me, to escape. Back then, I realized that those who wanted me to escape had such feelings."

The alchemist Thomas smelted iron of an unbelievable purity, and his ability left the previous ruler with much fear, such that Kusla and Weyland were nearly killed.

Back then, Fenesis did tell them to leave her, to hurry off and escape.

"But you told me not to, and had me silenced. For me, if others want me to escape, I never refused it once."

The giggling face was of bemusement.

With much remorse, Fenesis chuckled.

"And you brought me along in your escape. Back then, I realized. That might be the start of fate."

Her tiny hand was grabbing onto Kusla's clothes.

That one action explained one matter more than many words, do not leave

me alone.

"So..."

Kusla and Fenesis met silently in the eyes.

"I will."

It was a terse, yet powerful line.

"I do not wish to think of myself as a mere baggage. If I am said to be cursed, being a baggage is the curse to me."

The one who reached out to aid was Kusla. He never thought much of her initially, but the more he understood her, he started to hope that she would hold his hand.

And then, it was Fenesis reaching her hand out this time.

Kusla clasped that hand, and whispered,

"You are behaving as one of those in the workshop."

Certainly, not all in the world is pretty.

So, Fenesis's smile at this point was akin to a girl on a sickbed.

Yet they could continue on.

Without letting go of her hand, Kusla slowly bent over, paused, and stared at her.

For some reason, she watched him with dejection, and closed her eyes, ostensibly terrified.

He chuckled, and landed a kiss on her pretty forehead.



"I did say to wait for another time after all."

It seemed Fenesis had already predicted this, for her opened eyes were filled with rage.

"...How sleazy you are.

And so, with Fenesis' being like this, Kusla could only shrug, and stood up.

"Sleep now. We're most likely in for a turbulent day tomorrow."

"...You too."

In response to Fenesis' words, Kusla turned around,

"I am the Restless Alchemist after all."

Dumbfounded, Fenesis gave a snicker, and slowly closed her eyes.

Without a sound, Kusla left the bedroom.

Epilogue

Dawn approached, and all preparations were at hand.

Some chose to escape with the Knights, while others chose to abandon them, and remain in town.

Most of the ones headed out were Knights or mercenaries, and few blacksmiths and merchants.

For the Knights, victorious in the past, head forth, and the timid them would risk their lives.

Yet nobody would blame them. For it was personal freedom for one to live, and most importantly, nobody knew the outcome if they chose to remain in town. Perhaps they would be bound to a pitiful fate.

"...Leave me alone, and I will smash your hands in with a poker."

Irine kept swinging the hammer until the very end, and once she said those words, she lost consciousness.

With that outstanding skill of a blacksmith, she surely would be able to live on in this town, yet given how she repaired the dragon bodies with much enthusiasm, it would be arduous for her to remain. It was likely Irine never had the intention to obey Kusla's commands.

For she knew the world within the world would never satisfy her curious.

"Good, we're always busy"

Weyland shoved a weary Irine into the carriage, muttering.

"This is what we call a thrilling life."

"Well this is thrilling"."

As Weyland answered, three dragon flamethrowers could be seen next to him. They were all moved upon a modified carriage, each one of them led by four horses. The repaired, polished dragon statues of distilled bronze were eagerly eyeing the moment to charge through the battlefield.

Kusla sat on one of the carriages, where a dragon was on, and there was a throne atop it.

He looked up at the one seated on the throne.

"Aren't you afraid of heights?"

Kusla teased a peeved Fenesis, who was dressed like a war goddess, in helmet and armor, to prevent injury from arrows. She probably wanted to maintain a façade, for there were soldiers guarding her.

Also, one could see her close her eyes, muttering something, probably a recital. Her anxiety was clear for all to see, but even Kusla was no exception.

For the other side of the town doors were the enemies, knowing that the Knights intended to escape, eagerly rubbing their palms, awaiting. Surely this would be a fierce battle. No one would be calm enough to face whatever came next. If there was one so reckless, he would have died elsewhere.

Kusla scanned his eyes, and spotted the Herald Alzen and the Archduke Kratol. Both of them were scowling, awaiting the crucial moment.

Kusla then smiled to himself. If, as lead could turn to gold, so seeking an unpredictable development were a form of alchemy, no situation would be more befitting.

Once the town doors opened, awaiting them would be life and death. Stability, the word, shall remain in a foreign land at the end of the world. Nobody could predict whatever awaited them once they barged through the siege.

Yet Kusla remained optimistic.

"Everyone! Ready!"

Alzen's voice rang. With a clang, the soldiers wielded their weapons in response.

At the bottom and mouth of the dragon, the blacksmiths lit a flame. The asphalt prepared beforehand rumbled like the bellowing of Hell.

And to think there were such things on this world.

In this case, surely there would not be nothing awaiting them once they charged forth.

And.

"Hey!"

Kysla called out to a still rattling Fenesis.

"The present's after this. Do this well."

Weyland and Irine, crouched on the dragon behind him, "?" tilted their heads in unison, yet Fenesis merely smiled sarcastically.

She looked displeased, yet elated.

"I do not believe you."

"I guess so."

"So, I shall obtain it with my own strength."

Kusla was taken off guard, and Fenesis bared her teeth at him, just as Irine would.

"Open the doors!"

The doors opened.

Kusla recovered, and placed his hands on the wings.

Ahhh, so this is alchemy. Lead can be turned into gold, so he thought.

He could hear Fenesis inhaling loudly.

And so, he exerted more strength into his hands.

At that moment, the path to Magdala was lit with a blazing rainbow.

Afterword

Hello there, this is Isuna Hasekura. It does seem like the 4th volume has arrived in the blink of an eye. Even so, it has been five months since the previous volume. I do apologize for making everyone wait. During this time, I was optimistic, planning to release this in April or so, but...in any case, I did enjoy myself writing, and I hope this joy can be conveyed to everyone.

Speaking of which, the original material of this main content does exist. The specific materials and proportions were rumoured not to have been passed down, so if anyone is to ask if the fluids from back then could be replicated, the answer would be no. However, I do feel that saying it did exist should be fine. Regarding the installations, it was said the design was more intricate, and there were visuals, resembling a portable dryer even. Given current living standards, it is something that is taken for granted, but the people back then must have been shocked to see it, so I had such a thought as I wrote this story.

The season of this work was to be the harsh winter in the North, extremely cold, but I am writing this afterword when summer has just started, and for many, it is the first day of summer break, sometimes even the end of term. I do find it intriguing to be writing a winter story during a hot summer day. Also, I do not have the advantage of feeling cold. Speaking of which, thirty days and more of vacation seemed like an eternity back in the day, so much that I can't believe it, but now, after a roll, sleep, time passes so fast. Only the feeling of being hassles for assignment remains...no, I just have to work hard and finish it!

But I suppose summer is better. It gives the feeling of new developments happening in a snap. That's why textbooks of foreign languages and programming codes have been piling up on my bookshelf. B-but I just need to learn one to show progress! This is the spirit I want, I think.

After writing these, the volume has ended. With the pretty illustrations from Mr Tetsuhiro Nabeshima, please look forward to the next volume!

The next volume should be set in the cold seasons...so I think as the electric fan is on.

Isuna Hasekura



Credits

May Your Soul Rest in Magdala - Volume 4

Author: HASEKURA Isuna.

Illustrator: Nabeshima Tetsuhiro.

Translations: Hellping.

Ebook: dreamer2908.

Contents were fetched from the translation group's site on 2017.09.24.